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BY READER'S DIGEST

VOLUME 2 1998
THE READER'S DIGEST ASSOCIATION, INC.
PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK

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READER'S DIGEST

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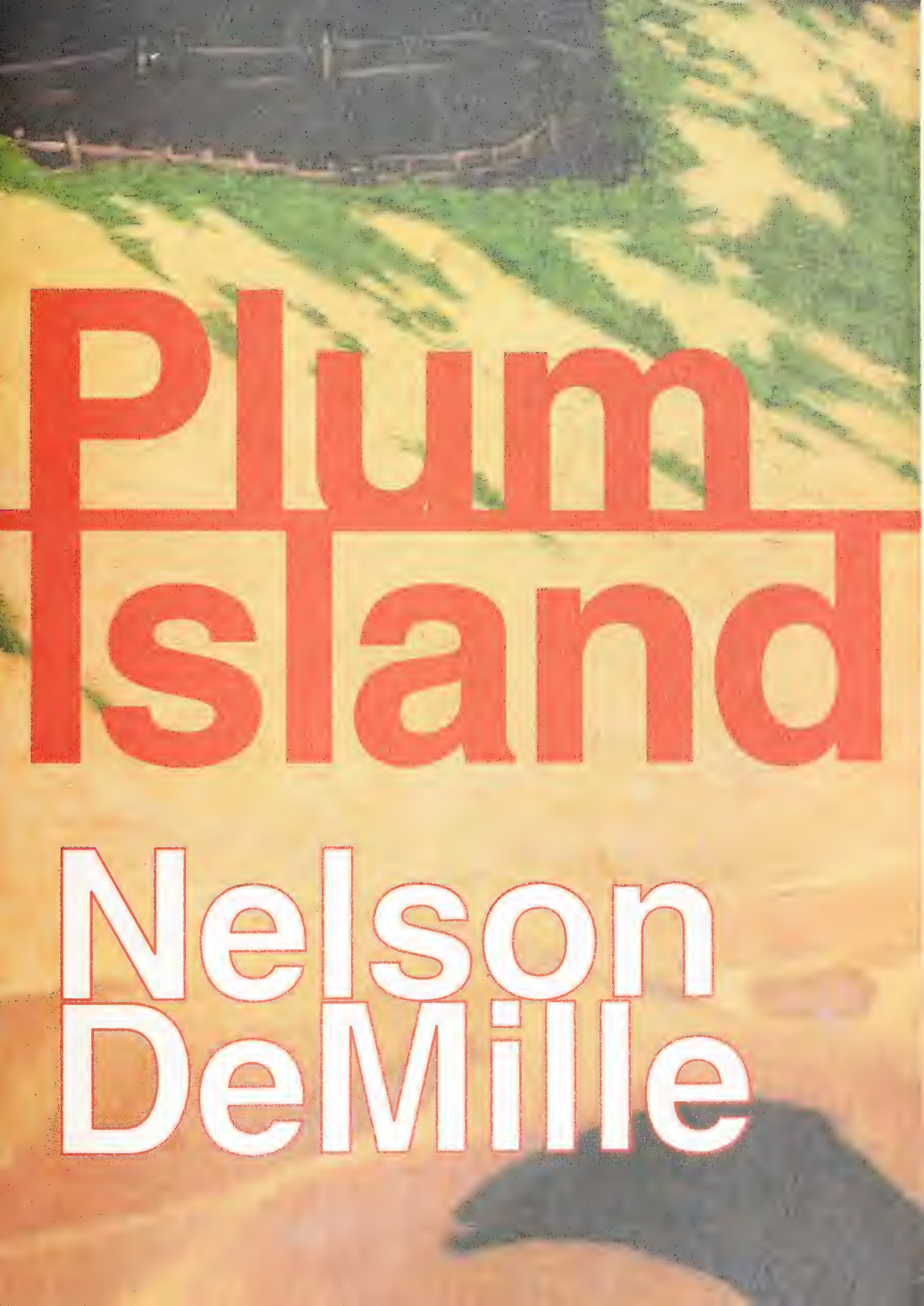

Plum
Island
Nelson
DeMille

Two scientists from a supersecret government research lab are found dead at their beach house, victims of foul play.

An isolated incident?

Or the beginning of something far worse?

Someone better find some answers.

And fast.

"A real page turner."
—*BookWire*

Chapter One

THROUGH my binoculars I could see this nice fortysomething-foot cabin cruiser anchored a few hundred yards offshore. There were two thirtyish couples aboard having a merry old time, sunbathing, banging down brews, and whatever. The women had on teensy-weensy bikinis, and one of the guys was standing on the bow, and then he jumped in the bay and swam around the boat. What a great country. I put down my binoculars and popped a Budweiser.

It was late summer—not meaning late August, but meaning September, before the autumnal equinox. Labor Day weekend had gone, and Indian summer was coming, whatever that is.

I, John Corey by name, convalescing cop by profession, was sitting on my uncle's back porch, deep in a wicker chair, with shallow thoughts running through my mind. The porch is an old-fashioned wraparound, circling three sides of an 1890s Victorian farmhouse. From where I sat, I could see south across a sloping green lawn to the Great Peconic Bay. The sun was low on the western horizon, which was where it belonged at six forty-five p.m.

I was wearing a plain white T-shirt and cutoff jeans that used to fit before I lost too much weight. My bare feet were propped on the

rail, and between my left and right big toes was framed the aforementioned cabin cruiser.

About this time of day you can start to hear crickets, locusts, and who knows what, but I'm a city boy, so I had a portable tape player beside me on the end table, with *The Big Chill* cranking. Lying on the floor near my right hand was my off-duty piece, a Smith & Wesson .38 revolver with a two-inch barrel.

Somewhere between "When a Man Loves a Woman" and "Dancing in the Street," I could hear or feel on the creaky old floorboards that someone was walking around the porch. Since I live alone and was expecting no one, I took the .38 and rested it on my lap. So you don't think I'm a paranoid citizen, I should mention that I was convalescing not from the mumps, but from three bullet wounds—two 9-mm and one .44-caliber magnum, not that the size of the holes matters. As with real estate, what matters with bullet holes is not size, but location, location, location. Obviously, these holes were in the right locations, because I was convalescing, not decomposing.

A man appeared around the west corner of the porch, then stopped about fifteen feet from me, searching the long shadows cast by the setting sun. He didn't seem to see me, but with the sun at his back it was also difficult for me to see his face or to guess his intentions. I said, "Help you?"

He turned his head toward me. "Hey, John. Didn't see you there."

"Have a seat, Chief." I slipped my revolver into my waistband.

Sylvester Maxwell, a.k.a. Max, who is the law in these here parts, sauntered toward me and plopped his tail on the rail, facing me. He was wearing a blue blazer, white button-down shirt, tan cotton slacks, boating shoes, and no socks. I couldn't tell if he was on- or off-duty. I said, "There're some soft drinks in that cooler."

"Thanks." He reached down and rescued a Budweiser from the ice. Max likes to call beer a soft drink.

He sipped awhile, contemplating a point in space about two feet from his nose. It was Monday, so the weekenders were gone, and it was, as I said, after Labor Day, when most of the summer rentals terminate and you could feel the solitude again. Max is a local boy,

and he doesn't get right down to business, so you just wait it out. He finally asked me, "You going to be staying here awhile?"

"Until the wind stops whistling through my chest."

He smiled, but then got contemplative again. Max is a big man, about my age—which is to say mid-forties—wavy blond hair, ruddy skin, and blue eyes. Women seem to find him good-looking, which works for Chief Maxwell, who is single and hetero.

He said, "So do you feel like some mental exercise?"

I didn't reply. I've known Max about ten years, but since I don't live around here, I only see him now and then. I should say at this point that I'm a New York City homicide detective, formerly working out of Manhattan North until I went down. That was on April 12. It made big news. The two perps who plugged me are still out there. After I spent a month or so in Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center, Uncle Harry suggested that his summerhouse was a fitting place for a hero. Why not? I arrived here in late May.

Max said, "I think you knew Tom and Judy Gordon."

Our eyes met. I understood. "Both of them?"

He nodded. "Both." After a moment of respectful silence he said, "I'd like you to take a look at the scene. As a favor to me. Before everyone else gets a piece of it. I'm short on homicide detectives."

In fact, the Southold Town Police Department has no homicide detectives, which usually works out okay because very few people get iced out here. When someone does, the Suffolk County homicide detail takes over, and Max steps aside. Max does not like this.

A bit of locale here. This is the North Fork of Long Island, state of New York, the township of Southold, founded, according to a plaque out on the highway, in 1640-something. The South Fork of Long Island, which is on the other side of Peconic Bay, is the trendy Hamptons: writers, artists, actors, and publishing types. Here on the North Fork the folks are farmers, fishermen, and such. And perhaps one murderer.

Anyway, Uncle Harry's house is specifically located in the hamlet of Mattituck, which is about a hundred road miles from West 102nd Street, where two Hispanic-looking gentlemen had pumped

fourteen or fifteen shots at yours truly, accomplishing three hits. Not an impressive showing, but I'm not criticizing or complaining.

I asked, "What if I get subpoenaed to testify out here at some inconvenient time? I'm not getting paid for this."

"Actually, I called the town supervisor and got an okay to hire you officially as a consultant. A hundred bucks a day."

"Wow. Sounds like the kind of job I have to save up for."

Max allowed himself a smile. "Hey, it covers your gas and phone. It's your chance to be a good Southold citizen."

"I'm a New Yorker. I'm not supposed to be a good citizen."

"Did you know the Gordons well? Were they friends?"

"Sort of."

"So? There's your motivation. Come on, John. Let's go."

In truth, I was bored, and the Gordons were good people. I stood up and put down my beer. "I'll take the job at a buck a week to make me official."

"Good. You won't regret it."

"Of course I will." I turned off "Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog" and slipped into my flip-flops. Max and I walked to the circular driveway in the front of the house. We got into his unmarked PD, a white Jeep Cherokee, and drove down the long driveway, which was covered with about a hundred years' worth of oyster and clam shells, because Uncle Harry and everyone before him threw shells on the driveway to keep the mud and dust down. Anyway, this used to be what's called a bay farm estate, and it's still bayfront, but most of the farm acreage has been sold. The landscape is a little overgrown, and the flora is mostly the kind of stuff they don't use much anymore, such as forsythia, pussy willow, and privet hedges. The house is painted cream, with green trim and a green roof. It's all pretty charming, really, and maybe I will buy it if the cop docs say I'm through.

On the subject of my disability, I have a good shot at a three-quarter tax-free pension for life. This is the NYPD equivalent of going to Atlantic City, tripping over a tear in the rug at Trump's Castle, and hitting your head on a slot machine in full view of a liability lawyer. Jackpot!

"They were found at five forty-five p.m. by a neighbor. They were both shot once in the head, and the neighbor found them lying on their patio deck. His name is Edgar Murphy, an old gent. He heard the Gordons' boat come in about five thirty, and about fifteen minutes later he walks over and finds them murdered. Never heard a shot."

"Hearing aid?"

"No. His wife's got okay hearing, too. So maybe it was a silencer. They heard the boat."

It was now seven ten p.m. I assumed the Suffolk County homicide guys were there by now.

We were driving along the main east–west road, conveniently called Main Road, toward a place called Nassau Point, where the Gordons live—or lived. The North Fork is sort of like Cape Cod, a windswept jut of land surrounded on three sides by water and covered with history. The full-time population is a little thin—about twenty thousand folks—but there are a lot of summer and weekend types, and the new wineries have attracted day-trippers.

Anyway, we turned south onto Nassau Point, a two-mile-long point of land that cuts into the Great Peconic Bay. From my dock to the Gordons' dock is about four miles. Tom and Judy Gordon were biologists who worked on Plum Island, which is about two miles off the tip of Orient Point, the last piece of land on the North Fork—next stop Europe. It is a very top secret biological research site that is so scary it has to be housed on an island, and you can bet that both Sylvester Maxwell and John Corey were thinking about that. I asked Max, "Did you call the feds?"

He shook his head. "Murder is not a federal offense."

"You know what I'm talking about, Max."

Chief Maxwell didn't respond.

WE APPROACHED the Gordon house, nestled on a small lane on the west shore of Nassau Point. The house was a 1960s ranch made over into a 1990s contemporary. The Gordons, from somewhere out in the Midwest and uncertain about their career paths, were

leasing the house, as they once mentioned to me. I think if I worked with the stuff they worked with, I, too, wouldn't make any long-range plans. Hell, I wouldn't even buy green bananas.

At the scene, little knots of neighbors and kids on bicycles stood around in the long purple shadows, talking and looking at the Gordon house. Three Southold police cars were parked in front of the house, as were two unmarked cars. A county forensic van blocked the driveway. Also on the street were two TV vans—one from a local news station, the other an NBC News van. It wasn't quite a media circus yet, but it would be when the rest of the news sharks got onto the Plum Island connection.

Yellow crime-scene tape was wrapped from tree to tree, cordoning off the house and grounds. Max pulled up behind the forensic van, and we got out. A few cameras flashed. Then a bunch of big video lights went on, and we were being taped for the eleven-o'clock news. I hoped the disability board wasn't watching, not to mention the perps who'd tried to ice *moi* and who would now know where I was.

Standing in the driveway was a uniformed officer with a pad—the crime-scene recorder—and Max gave him my name, title, and so forth, so I was officially logged in, now subject to subpoenas from the D.A. and potential defense attorneys. This was exactly what I didn't want, but I had been home when fate called.

We walked into the backyard. It was mostly silver-gray cedar deck, which cascaded down to the bay and ended at the long dock where the Gordons' boat was tied. It was a sleek white fiberglass speedboat—a Formula 303 named the *Spirochete,* which, as we know from Bio 101, is the nasty bug that causes syphilis. The Gordons had a sense of humor.

I observed the usual contingent of forensic lab people, plus three Southold town cops and a woman overdressed in a light tan suit jacket and matching skirt, white blouse, and sensible shoes. She was holding a notebook and pen and looking official.

Lying on the nice deck, side by side on their backs, were Tom and Judy, their feet toward the house and their heads toward the bay,

arms and legs askew as though they were making snow angels. I stared at the bodies. Tom and Judy Gordon were in their mid-thirties, very good shape, and even in death a uniquely handsome couple. They both wore blue jeans, running shoes, and polo shirts. Tom's shirt was black, with some marine-supply logo on the front, and Judy's was a more chic hunter green, with a little yellow sailboat on the left breast.

Working as I do in a city that counts about fifteen hundred murders a year, I am no stranger to death. Yet when it's someone you knew and liked, it makes a difference.

Tom had a bullet hole at the bridge of his nose. Judy had a hole in the side of her left temple. Assuming there was only one shooter, Tom, being a strapping guy, had probably gotten it first—a single shot to the head. Then Judy, turning in disbelief toward her husband, had taken the second bullet in the side of her temple. The two bullets had probably gone through their skulls and dropped into the bay. Bad luck for ballistics.

I looked around and couldn't see any place close by where the shooter could hide. The sliding glass door of the house was open, and maybe the shooter had been in there, but that was twenty feet from the bodies, and not many people can get a good head shot from that distance with a pistol. So there were two possibilities: The shooter was using a rifle, or the shooter was able to walk right up to them without causing them any alarm, maybe someone they knew. The Gordons had gotten out of their boat, walked up the deck, saw this person, and kept walking toward him or her. The person drilled them from no more than five feet away.

Max informed me, "The exit wounds are big, like the whole back of their skulls are gone. And, as you can see, the entry wounds are big. I'm guessing a forty-five-caliber. We haven't found the two bullets yet. They probably went into the bay." He motioned toward the glass doors. "The sliding door was forced, and the house is ransacked. No big items missing. TV, computer, CD player—all that stuff is there. But there may be jewelry and small stuff missing. I think a burglar or burglars were doing their thing. He, she, or they

see the Gordons through the glass door. He, she, or they step out onto the deck, fire, and flee." He looked at me. "Right?"

"If you say so." Sounded better than HOME OF TOP SECRET GERM WARFARE SCIENTISTS RANSACKED, AND SCIENTISTS FOUND MURDERED.

Max moved closer to me and said, "What do you think, John?"

"Was that a hundred an hour?"

"Come on, guy, don't jerk me around."

"Okay. You understand that the perp did not fire from that sliding glass door. He was standing right in front of them. The gunman was possibly sitting here in one of these chairs. The Gordons either knew him or were not unduly troubled by his presence on their back deck, and maybe it's a woman, nice and sweet-looking. They may have exchanged a word or two, but very soon after, the murderer produced a pistol and blew them away."

Chief Maxwell nodded.

"If the perp was looking for anything inside, it wasn't jewelry or cash. It was papers—bug stuff. He didn't kill the Gordons because they stumbled onto him. He killed them because he wanted them dead. He was *waiting* for them. You know all this."

He nodded.

I said, "Then again, Max, I've seen a lot of bungled burglaries where the homeowner got killed and the burglar got nothing. When it's a druggie thing, nothing makes sense."

I knelt beside the bodies, closest to Judy. Her eyes were open, really wide-open, and she looked surprised. Tom's eyes were open, too, but he looked more peaceful than his wife. I examined them without touching anything that would get the forensic types all bent up. I looked at hair, nails, skin, clothing, shoes, and so on. When I was done, I patted Judy's cheek and stood.

Maxwell asked me, "How long did you know them?"

"Since about June."

"Have you been to this house before?"

"Yes. You get to ask me one more question."

"Well, I have to ask. . . . Where were you about five thirty?"

"With your girlfriend."

He smiled, but he was not amused.

I asked Max, "How did you know I knew them?"

"They mentioned they met a New York cop who was convalescing. I said I knew you."

I looked around the backyard. To the east was the house, and to the south was a thick hedge, and beyond the hedge was the home of Edgar Murphy, the neighbor who found the bodies. To the north was an open marsh that stretched a few hundred yards to the next house. To the west the deck dropped in three levels to the bay.

Max said, "Edgar Murphy stated that the Gordons sometimes used their own boat to commute to Plum Island. I'm going to call Plum Island and see if I can find out what time they left. It should have taken them an hour and a half, two at the outside, to get here from Plum. I felt the engines." He jerked his thumb toward the boat. "They were still warm when I arrived, like the bodies. And something else—the line is clove-hitched around the piling."

"Well, there's a major break in the case. What's a line?"

"The *rope.* The boat's rope is just temporarily hitched. I deduce that they intended to go out in the boat again soon."

"Good observation."

"Right. So any ideas?"

"Nope. I think you beat me to them, Chief."

Chief Maxwell seemed to want to say something else, like "You're fired," but instead he said, "I've got to make a phone call." He went off into the house.

I glanced back at the bodies. The woman in the light tan suit was now outlining Judy in chalk. It's SOP in New York City that the investigating officer do the outline, and I guessed it was the same out here. I concluded, therefore, that the lady in tan was a homicide detective and that she was the officer assigned to investigate this case.

The scene of a homicide is one of the most interesting places in the world if you know what you're looking for and looking at. When I look at a dead body and at the scene around the body, I see things that most people don't see. Max touched the engines and the

bodies and noticed they were warm, he noticed how the boat was tied, and he registered a dozen other small details that the average citizen wouldn't notice. But Max isn't really a detective, which is why he called on me.

I happened to know the victims, and for the homicide detective on the case, this is a big plus. I knew, for instance, that the Gordons usually wore shorts, T-shirts, and Top-Siders in the boat on their way to Plum Island, and at work they slipped on their lab duds or their biohazard gear or whatever. Also, Tom didn't look like Tom in a black shirt, and Judy was more of a pastel person. My guess was that they were dressed for camouflage. Then there was the red soil in the treads of their running shoes. Where did it come from? Not from the laboratory, probably not from the walkway to the Plum Island ferry dock, not their boat, and not the dock or deck here. It appeared they were somewhere else today, and they were dressed differently for the day, and for sure, the day had ended differently.

Yet it was *still* possible that they just stumbled onto a burglary. I mean, this might have nothing to do with their jobs. The thing was, Max was nervous about that and sensitive to it. And before midnight this place would be visited by the FBI, Defense Intelligence people, and the CIA. Unless Max could catch a hophead burglar before then.

"Excuse me, are you supposed to be here?"

I turned toward the voice. It was the lady in the tan suit.

"I'm here with the band."

"Are you a police officer?"

Obviously my T-shirt and shorts didn't project an authority image. I replied, "I'm with Chief Maxwell." I turned and headed toward the dock. She followed.

"I'm Detective Penrose from Suffolk County homicide. I'm in charge of this investigation, and unless you have official—"

"You'll have to speak to the chief." I got down to the dock and walked to where the Gordons' boat was tied. It was very breezy, and the sun had set. A three-quarter moon had risen in the southeast, and it sparkled across the water. The tide was in, and the thirty-foot

boat was nearly at dock level. I jumped down onto the boat's deck.

"What are you doing? You can't do that."

She was very good-looking. She was dressed, as I indicated, rather severely, but the body beneath the tailored clothes was a symphony of curves, a melody of flesh. I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Filling out the rest of the form: age, early thirties; hair, medium length, coppery color; eyes, blue-green; skin, fair, light makeup; pouty lips; no visible marks or scars; no earrings; no nail polish; ticked-off expression on her face.

"Are you *listening* to me? *I* am in charge here!"

"Okay, we'll go see the chief together. Just a minute."

I took a quick look around the boat, but it was dark now. I said to Detective Penrose, "You should post an officer here all night."

"Thank you for sharing. Please come out of the boat. Now."

"Okay." I stepped onto the gunwale, and to my surprise she extended her hand, which I took. Her skin was cool. She pulled me up onto the dock, and at the same time, quick as a cat, her right hand snatched the revolver from my waistband. *Wow.*

She stepped back, my piece in her hand. "Stand where you are."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who are you?"

"Detective John Corey, NYPD, homicide, ma'am. I was hired as a consultant."

"Consultant? On a murder case? Who hired you?"

"The town."

"Idiotic."

"Right." She seemed undecided about what to do next, so to be helpful, I suggested, "Do you want to strip-search me?"

I thought I saw a smile pass over her lips in the moonlight.

She asked me, "What did you say your name was?"

"John Corey."

She searched her memory. "Oh. You're the guy—"

"That's me. Lucky me."

She seemed to soften, then gave my .38 a twirl and handed it to me, butt first. She turned and walked away.

I followed her up to the house, where the outdoor lights lit up the area. Max was talking to the forensic people. Then he turned to me and Detective Penrose and asked us, "You two met yet?"

Penrose responded, "Why is this man involved in this case?"

Chief Maxwell replied, "Because I want him to be involved."

"That's not your decision, Chief."

"And neither is it yours."

I said, "She's right, Chief. I'm out of here. Get me a ride home." I walked away. Then with a little practiced dramatics I turned and said, "By the way, did anyone take the aluminum chest in the stern of the boat?"

Max asked, "What aluminum chest?"

"The Gordons had a big aluminum chest that they used to stow odds and ends, and sometimes they used it for an ice chest to hold beer and bait."

"I'll look for it."

"Good idea." I went out to the front lawn. The neighbors had been joined by the morbidly curious as word of the double homicide spread through the small community. Video cameras rolled; reporters called out to me. Just like old times. I coughed into my hand in case the disability board was watching.

A uniformed cop from the backyard caught up to me, and we got into a marked Southold Township PD, and off we went.

EVERYONE needs a hangout, at least guys do. When I'm in the city, I hang out at the National Arts Club and sip sherry with people of culture and refinement. My ex-wife had trouble believing that, too.

When I'm out here, I frequent a place called the Olde Towne Taverne, though I usually avoid places with that many silent *e*'s. Anyway, the OTT is in charming downtown (or downetowne) Mattituck, which is about a block long. The OTT motif is sort of early ship, despite the fact that it's a mile from the water.

So there I was in the OTT. It was getting on to ten p.m., and the Monday night crowd was watching The Game—Dallas versus New York at the Meadowlands.

I was more nattily dressed than earlier, having changed into evening attire of tan Levi's jeans, blue polo by Ralph, and genuine Sperry Top-Siders. I looked like an ad for something.

I was sitting on a stool at one of those chest-high tables near the bar, and I had a good view of the TV, and I had my favorite meal in front of me: cheeseburger, french fries, potato skins, nachos, buffalo wings, and a Bud—a good balance of brown and yellow things.

Detective Penrose sort of snuck up on me from behind, and the next thing I knew, she was sitting on the stool facing me, a beer in her hand and her head blocking the screen. She said, "Max thought I'd find you here. I think we got off on the wrong foot back there."

"Nonsense. I don't mind having my own gun pulled on me."

"Look, if the town wants you as a consultant, that's okay with me, and if you wanted to pass on to me anything that you think is useful, feel free to call." She handed me her card, and I read, "Detective Elizabeth Penrose, Homicide."

I leaned across the table. She smelled good, sort of soapy and healthy. I said, "Look, Elizabeth, you know that I knew the Gordons, and maybe I know more than you or Max put together. So you came here to apologize, and you give me permission to tell you what I know. Wow! What a terrific opportunity for me. However, if I don't call you in a day or two, you'll have me down in your office for a formal interrogation. So just tell me where and when you want to take a statement from me." I sat back and turned my attention to the potato skins.

Detective Penrose stayed quiet awhile, then said, "Tomorrow, my office"—she tapped her card—"nine a.m. Don't be late." She stood, put her beer down, and left.

New York had the ball on their own thirty, with third and six, and this idiot of a quarterback throws La Bomba fifty yards into the wind, and the ball hangs there like the Goodyear blimp, and the three pass receivers and three Dallas guys are all under it, with their arms flapping, hopping around like they're praying for rain.

"Excuse me."

"Sit down."

She sat, but it was too late, and I missed the interception. The crowd at the stadium and in the OTT were going nuts, and the guys at the bar were yelling "Pass interference!" though there were no yellow flags, and the Dallas guy ran it back to the fifty. I watched the replay in slow motion. No pass interference. Sometimes I wish I could replay parts of my life in slow motion like that. Like my marriage, which was a series of bad calls.

Detective Penrose said, "I'm going back to the scene now. Someone from the Department of Agriculture in Manhattan is going to meet me at about eleven. Would you like to be there?"

"Don't you have a partner you can annoy?"

"Come on, Detective, let's start all over." She put her hand out.

I shook hands with her. My heart was on fire. Or maybe the nachos were causing reflux. It's hard to tell after forty.

If you're wondering about this Department of Agriculture thing, Plum Island is officially a Department of Agriculture installation, and they do things with animal diseases—anthrax and all that. But rumor has it that it goes beyond that. Also, a Department of Agriculture guy, like most government bureaucrats, wouldn't be caught dead working at night, so this guy was most probably CIA or FBI.

I looked at her. How do you say no to a perfect 10? I said, "I'll meet you there."

"All right." She walked out the door.

At halftime, with a 7–7 tie, my stomach was pumping acid into my ulcers. I popped two Zantac, then a Maalox, even though the gastrodoc said not to mix. My health, once robust, had taken a decided dip since the April 12 incident. My eating, drinking, and sleeping habits were never good, and the divorce and the job had taken their toll. I was starting to feel fortysomething, starting to feel my mortality. On the upside, I was in better shape than the Gordons.

I thought about Tom and Judy. Tom was a Ph.D. who didn't mind killing his brain cells with beer and wine, and he cooked a good steak on the grill. Judy, like her husband, was a Ph.D., unpretentious, good-natured, spirited, funny, and beautiful. John Corey, like every guy who met her, was in love with her.

Judy and Tom seemed to have taken well to this maritime province in the two years since they'd been here, and they seemed to enjoy powerboating and had gotten involved with the Peconic Historical Society. In addition, they were enchanted by the wineries and had befriended some of the local vintners, including Fredric Tobin, who threw lavish soirees at his château, one of which I attended as the Gordons' guest.

As a couple, the Gordons seemed happy, and I really never noticed anything amiss between them. But that's not to say they were perfect people. I searched my memory for the kind of thing that sometimes gets people murdered. Drugs? Not likely. Infidelity? Possible, but not probable. Money? They didn't have much to steal. So it came down to the job again. If the murders were related to the job, were the Gordons innocent victims, or were they traitors who sold death for gold?

I couldn't imagine the Gordons selling plague to some nutcases. On the other hand, everyone has a price. I used to wonder how they could afford to rent that house on the water and buy that expensive boat. Now maybe I knew how and also why they needed a high-speed boat and a house with a private dock. It all made sense, and yet my instincts were telling me not to believe the obvious.

Chapter Two

IT WAS after eleven as I drove along the lane that led to the Gordons' house. A pleasant breeze brought the smell of the sea through the open windows of my new moss-green Jeep Grand Cherokee Limited, a forty-thousand-dollar indulgence that the nearly deceased John Corey thought he owed himself.

I parked fifty yards from the house. Avoiding anyone who looked

like the working press, I stepped over the yellow tape. The uniformed crime-scene recorder logged me in again.

I asked him, "Do you have a guy from the Department of Agriculture logged in?"

He replied without even looking at the sheet, "No."

"But there is a man from the Department of Agriculture here. Correct?"

"You'll have to ask Chief Maxwell."

"I'm asking you why you haven't logged this guy in."

"You'll have to ask Chief Maxwell."

"I will." Actually, I already knew the answer. They don't call these guys spooks for nothing.

I walked around to the deck. In the places where the Gordons had lain were now two chalk outlines, looking ghostly in the moonlight. I went into the house through the sliding door, which opened into a big living-room and dining-room combo. A few forensic types were still around, and I asked one of them, "Chief Maxwell?"

She jerked her thumb over her shoulder and said, "Kitchen. Don't touch anything on the way there."

"Yes, ma'am." I floated across the Berber carpet and alighted in the kitchen, where a conference seemed to be in progress. Present were Max, Elizabeth Penrose, a gentleman in a dark suit who didn't need a sign that said FBI, and another gentleman, more casually dressed in denim jacket and jeans, a blood-red shirt, and hiking boots, a sort of parody of what a Department of Agriculture bureaucrat might look like if he ever left the office and had to visit a farm. Everyone was standing. There was a cardboard box filled with Styrofoam coffee cups, and everyone had a cup in his or her hand. It was interesting and significant, I thought, that this group was assembled sort of out of sight in the kitchen.

Max, incidentally, had spiffed himself up for the feds and/or the press by putting on a tie, a silly one decorated with nautical flags. Elizabeth was still wearing her tan suit, but had removed her jacket, revealing one holstered .38 and two holstered 36 D's.

Max said to the two guys, "This is Detective John Corey, homi-

cide," and let it go at that, without mentioning that my jurisdiction ended about a hundred miles west of here. Max indicated the dark suit. "John, this is George Foster, FBI." He looked at Mr. Bluejeans and said, "And this is Ted Nash, Department of Agriculture."

We shook hands all around.

Ms. Penrose asked Mr. Foster, "Does the FBI want to be publicly connected with this case?"

"Not at this time." Mr. Foster added, "It makes people think there's a real problem."

Mr. Nash said, "Since there is *no* connection between the Gordons' work and their deaths, the Department of Agriculture will issue no public statements, except an expression of sorrow over the murders of two well-liked and dedicated employees."

I mentioned to Mr. Nash, "By the way, you forgot to sign in."

He looked at me, a little surprised and a lot annoyed, and replied, "I'll— Thank you for reminding me."

"Anytime. Every time."

After a minute of public relations chitchat Max said to Messrs. Foster and Nash, "Detective Corey knew the deceased."

Mr. FBI immediately got interested and asked me, "How did you know them?"

It's not a good idea to start answering questions—it gives people the idea you're a cooperative fellow, which I'm not. I didn't reply.

Max answered for me, "Detective Corey knew the Gordons socially, only three months. I've known John about ten years."

Mr. Nash was leaning against a kitchen counter looking at me. We stared at each other, the two dominant males in the room, if you will, and we decided without a word that we didn't like each other.

I turned my attention to Max and Penrose and asked, "Have we determined that this is more than a homicide? Is that why the federal government is here?"

Mr. Ted Nash replied coolly, "We are being cautious, Detective. We have no concrete evidence that this homicide is connected to matters of . . . well, to be blunt, matters of national security."

I remarked, "I never realized the Department of Agriculture was

involved in national security. Do you have, like, undercover cows?"

Mr. Nash gave me a nice smile and said, "We have wolves in sheep's clothing."

"Touché." Jerk.

Mr. Foster butted in before it got nasty and said, "We all hope it was just a murder with no Plum Island connection, but we'd be very remiss if we didn't check it out."

I regarded George Foster a moment. He was thirtyish, typical clean-cut, bright-eyed FBI type, wearing the FBI dark suit and halo.

I shifted my attention to Ted Nash. He was closer to my age, tanned, curly salt-and-pepper hair, blue-gray eyes, impressive build, and all in all, what the ladies would call a hunk, which is one of the reasons I didn't like him, I guess. I mean, how many hunks do you need in one room?

I might have been more pleasant to him, except he was throwing glances at Elizabeth Penrose, who was catching them and pitching them back. The whole planet was about to get anthrax and die or something, and these two are like dogs in heat. Really disgusting.

Max interrupted my thoughts and said to me, "John, we have still not recovered the two bullets. We'll be dredging and diving early tomorrow." He added, "There were no shell casings found."

I nodded. An automatic would spit out shell casings, whereas a revolver would not. If the weapon was an automatic, then the murderer was cool enough to gather the shell casings.

So far we had basically nothing. I regarded Mr. Nash again. He looked like a worried man, and I was happy to see that between thoughts of Ms. Penrose, he was thinking about saving the planet. In fact, everyone in the kitchen seemed to be thinking about things, probably germs, and they were probably wondering if they were going to wake up with red blotches or something.

Ted Nash reached into the cardboard box and asked Detective Penrose, "Another coffee, Beth?"

Beth? What the hell . . .

She smiled. "No, thank you."

Max continued. "We've searched the entire house and turned up

nothing unusual or significant, except that it is a very amateur job of pretending it was a burglary."

I said, "It still could have been a junkie. Or maybe the perp was interrupted or was looking for one thing and found it."

"Maybe," Max agreed.

Everyone looked pensive, which is a good cover-up for clueless.

The striking thing about this double homicide, I thought, was still the outdoor shooting right on the deck. The killer either had what he wanted from the house, or the Gordons were carrying what the killer wanted, in plain view, that is, the ice chest.

And the killer knew the Gordons, and they knew him. I was convinced of that. Also, he *had* to have had a silencer. No pro would pop off two big boomers outdoors. And it was probably an automatic, because revolvers don't adapt well to a silencer.

Max said, "We never found that ice chest."

Mr. Foster gave me his considered opinion. "We think the Gordons were carrying the chest, and the killer or killers wanted what was inside, and what was inside was you-know-what. I think the Gordons were selling the stuff and the deal went bad."

So that would presuppose two things—the Gordons were, one, really stupid and, two, totally indifferent to the consequences of their selling death for gold. What I knew for sure about Tom and Judy was that they were neither stupid nor heartless.

Max said, "And here's something interesting, John. According to the security people on Plum, the Gordons signed out at noon, got into their boat, and headed out."

That meant five and a half hours between the time the Gordons left Plum Island at noon and the time Mr. Murphy said he heard the Gordons' boat at five thirty. Where were they?

Max said, "That's about all we have at the moment, John. We'll have the lab reports tomorrow, and there are people we have to speak to tomorrow. Can you suggest anyone we ought to see?"

"I don't know who the Gordons were friends with, and to the best of my knowledge they had no enemies." I said to Mr. Nash, "Meanwhile, I want to speak to the people on Plum Island."

Mr. Nash replied, "It may be possible for you to speak to some people who work on Plum Island." He added, "But in the interest of national security I must be present at all interviews."

I replied in my best New York obnoxious tone, "This is a murder investigation, remember? Don't pull that stuff on me."

It got a little frosty in the kitchen. Max, feeling, I suppose, like the host at this gathering of egos, said, "I don't have any problem with Ted Nash being present at any interviews or interrogations." He looked at Penrose.

My buddy Beth gave me a curt glance and said to Nash, "I have no problem with that either."

George Foster pointed out, "Any meeting, interview, or interrogation at which Ted is present, the FBI will also be present."

I was wondering if Max was going to pull the plug on me next.

The reasonable Mr. Foster went on. "My area of concern is domestic terrorism. Ted Nash is concerned with international espionage." He looked at me, Max, and Penrose and said, "You are investigating a homicide under New York State law. If we all keep out of one another's way, we'll be fine. I won't play homicide detective if you won't play defenders of the free world. Fair?"

I asked Nash bluntly, "Who do you work for?"

"I'm not at liberty to say at this time." He added, "Not the Department of Agriculture."

"Fooled me," I said sarcastically. "You guys are sharp."

Penrose said, "Detective Corey, can we have a word outside?"

I ignored her and pressed on with Mr. Nash. I needed to get seven points on the board, and I knew how to do it. I said to Nash, "We'd like to go to Plum Island tonight."

"Out of the question," he said. "The island is off-limits."

"Didn't we just agree that Chief Maxwell, Detective Penrose, and I are investigating a murder?"

"Not on Plum Island you're not."

"We sure are." I love this stuff. I really do. I hoped Penrose was seeing what a jerk this guy was.

Mr. Nash said, "There is no one on Plum now."

I replied, "There are security people on Plum now, and I want to speak to them. Now."

"In the morning and not on the island."

"Now and on the island, or I'll get a judge out of bed and get a search warrant."

Mr. Nash stared at me. "It is unlikely that a local judge would issue a search warrant for U.S. government property. You would need to involve an assistant U.S. attorney and a federal judge. I assume you know that if you're a homicide detective, and you may also know that neither a U.S. attorney nor a federal judge will be enthusiastic about issuing such a warrant if it involves national security." He added, "So don't bluff and bluster."

"How about if I threaten?"

Finally Max had had enough of Mr. Nash, whose sheep's clothing was slipping. "Plum Island may be federal land, but it's part of the township of Southold, the county of Suffolk, and the state of New York. I want you to get us authorization to go to the island tomorrow, or we'll get a court order."

Mr. Nash now tried to sound pleasant. "There's really no need to go to the island, Chief."

Detective Penrose found herself on my side, of course, and said, "We have to insist."

Finally Mr. Nash said, "Well . . . I'll make a call about that."

Mr. Foster didn't let the opportunity pass to tweak Mr. Nash and said, "I think we're all in agreement that we're going out there tomorrow morning, Ted."

Mr. Nash nodded. He looked at me and said, "At some point, Detective Corey, if we determine that a federal crime has taken place, we probably won't need your services any longer."

I had reduced Teddy boy to pettiness, and I knew when to leave well enough alone. I addressed Mr. Nash in a professional tone. "What kind of bugs do they play around with on Plum? Tell me what I'm supposed to worry about, so when I can't get to sleep tonight, I have a name for it."

Mr. Nash cleared his throat and said, "I suppose you should

know how high the stakes are here." He looked at Foster, and Foster nodded. Then Nash said to us, "The United States no longer engages in biological warfare development. However, there are certain diseases that make the transition between legitimate study and potential biological weapons. Anthrax is one such disease. In other words, there is a crossover between animal and human disease, between offensive and defensive biological warfare."

Convenient crossovers, I thought.

Mr. Nash continued. "African swine fever, for instance, has been associated with HIV. We study African swine fever on Plum. Same with Rift Valley fever, the Hanta virus, and other retroviruses, and the filoviruses, such as Ebola Zaire and Ebola Marburg. Even though there is usually a species barrier in regard to animal diseases infecting humans, we're discovering that some of these diseases can jump species."

The kitchen was really quiet.

"The problem is, if someone got his hands on these microorganisms and has the knowledge to propagate more from the samples and if it got into the population somehow . . . then, well, you may have a public-health problem."

I asked, "You mean like an end-of-the-world plague, with the dead piling up in the streets?"

"Yes, that kind of public-health problem."

Silence.

"So," Mr. Nash said in a grave tone, "we're anxious to discover if the Gordons took something off that island and transferred it to an unauthorized person or persons."

Beth asked, "Can you . . . can anyone on the island determine if anything is actually missing from the laboratories?"

Ted Nash looked at Beth the way a professor looks at a favorite student who has asked a brilliant question. "As you probably suspect, Beth, it may not be possible to discover if anything is missing. The microorganisms can be propagated secretly in some part of the island, then taken off the island, and no one would ever know."

Mr. Foster looked around the room and offered, "Worst-case sce-

nario is that the organisms, whatever they are, are cultured, then introduced or delivered to the population in various ways: Some can be delivered in the water supply, some can be airborne, some can be spread by people and animals. I'm no expert, but I understand that the potential for infection and contagion is very high."

On that cheery note I said, "I'm going out for some air."

I DIDN'T go directly outside but detoured to a bedroom where Tom and Judy had set up their office.

A compu-nerd sat at the PC. The gent identified himself as Detective Mike Resnick, with the county police department.

The printer was humming away, and stacks of paper lay all over the desktop. I asked Mike, "What do we have so far?"

"Oh . . . mostly . . . Hold on. . . . What do we . . . What?"

"Have so far." I just love talking to geeks at the computer.

"Oh . . . mostly letters . . . What's this? Nothing."

"Anything mentioning Plum Island?"

"No."

"How about financial stuff? Investments, checkbook—"

He glanced up from the monitor. "Yeah. They wrote their checks on the computer. There's the printout of all their checkbook activity for the past twenty-five months—since they opened the account." He pointed to a stack of paper near the printer.

I took the stack and said, "Do you mind if I look through this?"

"No, but don't go far with it."

"I'll just take it into the living room, where the light is better."

"Yeah." He was playing with the computer again.

Out in the living room, I walked over to the bookshelves on either side of the fireplace. To the left was fiction, mostly paperbacks—a nice mixture of trash and treasures. To the right were sailing books, navigational charts, and such. For landlocked midwesterners the Gordons had really gotten into boating. On the other hand, I'd been out with them a few times, and even I could tell they weren't great sailors. They just liked to open up the throttles now and then. Which brought me back to the thought that this was a drug thing.

With that in mind, I put the computer printouts down and, using my handkerchief, took down an oversized book of navigational charts and flipped through the pages, my finger wrapped in the handkerchief. I was looking for radio frequencies, cellular phone numbers, or whatever a drug runner might mark in his chart book.

The charts seemed clean except for one with a yellow highlighter line that connected the Gordons' dock with the Plum Island dock. This was the route they took to work, passing between the southern shore of the North Fork and Shelter Island. That wasn't much of a clue to anything. I noticed that on Plum Island, printed in red, were the words "Restricted Access—U.S. Government Property—Closed to the Public."

I was about to shut the book when I saw something toward the bottom of the page. In the water south of Plum Island was written in pencil "44106818." Was this a standard eight-digit grid coordinate? A radio frequency? Drugs? Bugs? What?

There is a point in homicide investigations when you start to assemble more clues than you know what to do with. I put down the chart book, retrieved the stack of printouts, and walked out down to the bay, where a nice bench faced the water. I threw the purloined papers on the bench and stared out at the bay. Little ripples rocked the Gordons' boat down at the dock. White clouds sailed past the big, bright moon, and the air smelled more of the land than the sea as the light wind shifted around and blew from the north.

I leaned back and regarded the night awhile. On a small patch of lawn to the left of the Gordons' dock was a tall white flagpole with a crossbar, called a yardarm, from which ran two ropes, or lines, called halyards. Note how I have picked up some of the nautical lingo. Anyway, the Gordons had found a whole collection of flags and pennants in the garage, and they'd sometimes hang signal pennants from the halyards for fun, such as the pennant for "Prepare to be boarded" or "The captain is ashore."

I had noticed earlier that at the top of the mast the Gordons had run up the Jolly Roger, and I thought it ironic that the last flag they had flown was the skull and crossbones. I noticed, too, that on each

halyard was a signal pennant. I could barely make them out in the dark, but it didn't matter, because I was clueless about nautical signals.

Beth Penrose sat down on the left end of the bench. She was wearing her jacket again, which was a disappointment. She kicked off her shoes and rubbed her feet in the grass.

After a few minutes of companionable silence—or maybe frosty stillness—she said, "Why were you so nasty to Ted Nash?"

"It's a guy thing."

"Everyone thinks you're an arrogant idiot and a useless incompetent. *And* you've lost my respect."

"That hurts, Beth."

"Detective Penrose to you, buster."

"Ted Nash called you—"

"You know, Corey, I got this case because I begged the chief of homicide for it. This is my first real murder case. So if you're here to make me look bad, get lost." She stood.

I stood, too. "Hold on. I'm here to help."

"Then help."

"Okay. Listen up. First some advice. Don't talk too much to Foster or your buddy Ted."

"I know that, and cut the 'buddy Ted' business."

"Look, I know you think I'm attracted to you and you probably think I'm coming on to you, but . . . well . . . you see . . . one of those bullets that hit me— How do I say this? Well, it hit me in a funny place, okay?"

She was staring out to sea. "I thought you said you were hit in the stomach and the lung."

"That, too."

"Any brain damage?"

"Maybe."

"And now you want me to believe you've been neutered by yet another bullet." She put her hand up to her face, and I couldn't tell if she was crying or laughing.

I said, "Please don't tell anyone."

Finally she got control of herself and replied, "I'll try to keep it out of the papers."

"Thanks." I let a few seconds pass, then asked her, "Do you live around here?"

"No. I live in western Suffolk."

"That's a long trip."

"We're all staying at the Soundview Inn out in Greenport."

"Hey, I have a nice place out here, and you're welcome to stay there. I told you I'm safe. Hell, NYPD personnel says I'm allowed to use the ladies' room at headquarters."

"Cut it out."

"Seriously, Beth, I have a computer printout here—two years' worth of financial stuff. We can work on it tonight."

"Who authorized you to take that?"

"You did. Right?"

She hesitated, then nodded and said, "I want them back in my hands tomorrow morning."

"Okay. I'll pull an all-nighter with this. Help me out."

She seemed to mull that over, then pulled out her notebook. "Give me your phone number and address."

I gave her the information, including directions.

She said, "I'll call first if I'm coming."

I sat back down on the bench, and she sat at the opposite end, the computer printouts between us.

Beth said, "Listen . . . Can I call you John?"

"Please do."

"John, what's happening with this case? You know something you're not sharing."

I settled back on the bench and replied, "Well, Beth, what's happening with this case is that the obvious is leading to the improbable, and everyone is trying to make the improbable fit the obvious. But it don't work that way, partner." I stood and said, "Let's go down to the dock."

She slipped her shoes on, and we walked down toward the dock. I said, "I knew the Gordons. They respected the power of the genie

in the bottle, and I think I knew them well enough to say they wouldn't sell the genie in the bottle."

She didn't reply.

I continued. "I remember Tom once told me that Judy was having a bad day because some calf that she'd become attached to had been purposely infected with something and was dying. These are not the kind of people who want to see children dying of plague. I mean, if nothing else, why would the Gordons sell bacteria and virus that could kill *them* and their families?"

Beth Penrose pondered that a moment, then replied, "I don't know, John. Why do people do crazy things? They talk themselves into it. They're angry at something or somebody. Ten million bucks. Two hundred bucks. Everyone has a price."

I glanced at her and saw she was looking at me as we walked. I was happy to discover that Beth Penrose was capable of some deeper thinking, and I knew she was relieved to discover that I wasn't the idiot she thought I might be. On the dock, I said, "On the Gordons' bookshelf I found a book of nautical charts with an eight-digit number penciled on one of the pages. You should take the book and keep it someplace safe. There may be more marks."

She stared at me for a few seconds, then asked, "Okay, what do you think this is about?"

"Well, if you ratchet down the moral dial about halfway, you go from selling plague for money to drugs for money."

"Drugs?"

"Yeah. Morally ambiguous in some minds, big money in everyone's mind." I motioned toward the boat. "And what's with this commuting by boat? It takes maybe thirty minutes to drive from here to the government ferry on Orient Point. The ferry ride to Plum Island is maybe twenty minutes, compliments of Uncle Sam. Total about one hour, as opposed to nearly two hours by speedboat. Yet the Gordons took their own boat from here to Plum. This never made sense to me. Now maybe it does. After work, on designated days, the Gordons leave Plum at the appointed hour and make a high-speed dash out to sea. There they rendezvous with a ship, a

seaplane, or whatever. They take on board about a hundred kilos of Colombian marching powder and dash back toward land. If they're spotted by the DEA or coast guard, they look like Mr. and Mrs. Clean out for a spin. Even if they're stopped, they flash the Plum Island ID and do a song and dance. Right?"

"Usually." She added, "I'll see if there are any reports with DEA, coast guard, or customs regarding the *Spirochete.*"

"Good." I thought a moment, then said, "Okay, so after the Gordons cop the junk, at some prearranged spot they transfer the ice chest to the local pharmaceutical distributors, who give them another chest in return with a bunch of bucks in it. The distributor then drives into Manhattan, and another duty-free import is completed. Happens every day. The question is, Did the Gordons participate, and if so, is that what got them killed? I hope so. Because the other thing scares me, and I'm not easily scared."

She mulled this over, looking around the speedboat. She said, "It *might* fit. If we can determine it was drugs, we can rest easier. Until then we have to go ahead with the idea that it's plague, because if it is and we're not on top of it, we could all be dead."

IT WAS after two a.m., and I was getting cross-eyed reading the Gordons' computer printouts. I had a pot of coffee going in Uncle Harry's big, old kitchen, and I was sitting at the round table by the bay window that faced east to catch the morning sun.

It didn't take me long to see that the Gordons were overextended. They had payments on two cars, the boat, the house rental, assorted insurances on same, utilities, five credit cards, big-time oil-company bills, mostly for the powerboat, and regular living and breathing expenses. Also, there was a hefty ten-thousand-dollar down payment on the *Spirochete* the April before last.

I've done enough of these financial analyses to spot things that needed checking out. There was only one such thing in the printouts, a biggie—a certified check for twenty-five thousand dollars made out to a Margaret Wiley. The funds to cover the check, transferred from the Gordons' money-market account, represented

nearly all their savings. The check was dated March 7 of this year, and there was no notation regarding the purpose of the check. I found the local telephone directory and located a Margaret Wiley who lived on Lighthouse Road in the hamlet of Southold.

I really wanted to call Margaret, but she might be annoyed at the two a.m. phone call. But this was no ordinary murder—even as I hesitated to wake Margaret Wiley, a civilization-destroying plague could be spreading over the nation. I hate when that happens.

I called the number. The phone rang, and the lady of the house was awakened. She said, "Hello?"

"Margaret Wiley, please."

"Speaking. Who is this?" asked the groggy and elderly voice.

"This is Detective Corey, ma'am. Police." I let her imagine the worst for a second or two. That usually wakes them up.

"*Police?* What's happened?"

"Mrs. Wiley, you've heard about the murders on Nassau Point?"

"Oh . . . yes. How awful."

"You knew the Gordons?"

"No. . . . Well, I met them once. I sold them a piece of land."

"In March?"

"Yes."

"For twenty-five thousand dollars?"

"Yes. But what does that have to do with—"

"Where is the land, ma'am?"

"Oh, it's a nice piece of bluff overlooking the Sound."

"I see. They wanted to build a house?"

"No. They can't build there. I sold the development rights to the county. It has to stay undeveloped. Except for agriculture."

"I see. Did they mention to you why they wanted it?"

"Yes. They said they wanted a place to sit and watch the sea. It's a one-acre parcel that drops fifty feet to the beach. It's quite beautiful. They were a lovely couple. It's so awful."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." I hung up.

So they wanted a place to sit and watch the sea. For twenty-five thousand bucks? That was almost all they had. And if they were

transferred by the government, how would they unload an acre of land that had no use for development?

So maybe maritime drug running would make sense. I'd have to take a look at that land. I wondered if anyone had yet found the deed to the property among the Gordons' papers.

I poured a cup of coffee. The windows above the sink were open, and I could hear the last of the locusts and tree frogs and an owl hooting nearby in the foggy mist that rolled in from the Great Peconic Bay. The autumn here is tempered by the big bodies of water that hold their summer heat until November. There is the occasional hurricane in August, September, or October and the odd northeaster in the winter. But basically the climate is benign, the coves and inlets numerous, the fogs and mists frequent—an ideal place for smugglers, pirates, rumrunners, and, more recently, drug runners.

The wall phone rang. I remembered Max was supposed to call about the Plum Island outing. I picked up and said, "Pizza Hut."

After a confused second Beth Penrose said, "Hello."

"Hello."

"We're going to be on the eight a.m. ferry."

"Is there an earlier ferry?"

"Yes, but—"

"Why do we want the cover-up team to get there before us?"

She didn't reply to that but said, "We'll be accompanied by the island's security director, a Mr. Paul Stevens."

"Who's going on the earlier ferry?"

"I don't know. Look, John, they've had some problems in the past, and they do cover-up real well. You're only going to see what they want you to see. Don't get overly serious about this trip."

"Who's going?"

"Me, you, Max, George Foster, and Ted Nash." She asked, "Do you know where the ferry is?"

"I'll find it. Where's Ted?"

"How do I know?"

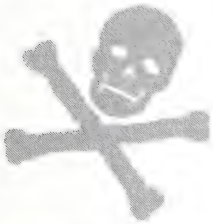
"Keep your door bolted. He fits the description of a rapist-murderer I'm looking for."

"Give it a break, John." She hung up.

I turned off the coffeepot, left the kitchen, and made my way through the big, lonely house, up the winding, creaky staircase, and down the hall to the high-ceilinged room that I'd slept in as a boy. I tumbled into bed, and like Beth Penrose and Sylvester Maxwell and Ted Nash and George Foster and many others that night, I stared up at the ceiling and thought about murder, death, Plum Island, and plague. I saw in my mind's eye the image of the Jolly Roger flapping in the night sky, the death's-head white and grinning.

It occurred to me that the only people resting in peace tonight were Tom and Judy Gordon.

Chapter Three



I WAS up at six a.m., showered, and dressed in shorts, T-shirt, and Top-Siders—suitable attire for a quick change into biohazard gear or whatever they call it. I decided to carry my piece. You never know what the day is going to bring.

By six forty-five I was traveling east on Main Road, through the heart of the wine country. To my left, as I passed through the hamlet of Peconic, was the most successful vineyard and winery—Tobin Vineyards—owned by Fredric Tobin, whom I'd met once briefly and who was a friend of the Gordons'. I made a mental note to call on the gentleman and see if he could shed any light on the case.

It was a nice morning. Big birds sailed and soared on the morning thermals, and little birds sang and chirped in the fields and trees. All was right with the world, except that Tom and Judy were in the county morgue and very possibly there was a sickness in the air, rising and falling with the thermals. And yet everything seemed normal, including myself.

The hamlet after Peconic is Southold, which is also the name of

the whole township. It's about here where the vineyards end and the land narrows between the Long Island Sound and the bay, and everything looks a little more windswept and wild.

I stopped at a convenience store and bought a coffee and a plastic-wrapped sandwich. I swear, you can eat the shrink-wrap and Styrofoam and not notice the difference. Properly fortified, I continued on. The land narrowed, and there was water on both sides of the road—the Sound to my left and Orient Harbor to my right.

Past the entrance to Orient Beach State Park, up ahead on the right, I saw a flagpole, from which flew the Stars and Stripes at half-mast. I assumed that the flag's position had to do with the Gordons, and therefore the flagpole was at the Plum Island ferry station. I checked my dashboard digital clock, which read 07:29. I was a half hour early for the outbound ferry to Plum Island, but I was on time for the inbound from Plum, which is what I intended.

Through a light mist a white-and-blue ferryboat was gliding toward the two ferry slips. The chain-link gates to the parking lot were open, and I saw no guard around, so I drove into the lot toward some warehouses by the wharves. I parked near some delivery trucks and shipping containers, hoping my vehicle would be lost in the clutter. From about fifty yards away I watched through binoculars as the ferry, *The Plum Runner,* turned and backed into the closest of the slips. I watched a group of men disembark from the open stern directly onto the parking lot. I counted ten men, all dressed in some sort of blue uniform, probably the night security guards. Next off the ferry was a big guy in a blue blazer and tie, chatting with the guards, and I guessed he could be Paul Stevens, the security chief.

Then came four guys in spiffy suits, and I had to figure they'd gone over before the seven a.m. ferry, either on a special ferry run or on another boat, or a helicopter.

And last but not least, waltzing off the boat, wearing casual attire, were Mr. George Foster and Mr. Ted Nash, which did not completely surprise me. Those s.o.b.'s. I had expected they'd pull a fast one on me. The other four guys were probably up from D.C.

The blue-blazer guy dismissed the guards and disappeared back

into the ferry. Then the four suits got into a black Chevy Caprice and drove off, out of the chain-link gates I'd entered.

At this point I drove toward the ferry, as if I'd just arrived. I parked away from the pier and sipped at my empty coffee cup. At about ten to eight an old station wagon pulled up beside me, and Max got out, wearing jeans, a windbreaker, and a fishing cap pulled down low. I got out of the car and asked him, "Is that a disguise, or did you get dressed in the dark?"

He frowned. "Nash and Foster suggested I shouldn't be seen going to Plum."

I was going to tell Max that I saw Nash and Foster get off the ferry from Plum, but since Max hadn't thought to get here early, he didn't deserve to know what I knew.

Cars started arriving, and the experienced Plum Island commuters hit the pier with split-second timing as the ferry horn blasted.

Ted Nash called out to Max and me, "Hey, all aboard!"

I looked around for Beth Penrose, and there she was, walking away from a black Ford that had been parked before even I arrived. Could it be there were people in the world as bright as I?

Max and I walked toward the pier as the ferry horn sounded again. Detective Penrose joined Mr. Nash and Mr. Foster, and they were chatting near the ferry as we approached.

Coming across the stern deck toward us was the gentleman with the blue blazer. He said, "Good morning. I'm Paul Stevens, security chief of Plum Island." He sounded like he had a computer-generated voice.

Nash, in rose-colored golf slacks, said, "I'm Ted Nash with the Department of Agriculture." What a load of bull. Not only had these three clowns just come from Plum Island together but Nash was still putting out the agriculture manure.

Stevens had a clipboard in his hand. He looked like one of those whistle-and-clipboard types—short blond hair, icy blue eyes, Mr. Can-Do, ex-jock, fit and trim, ready to organize a sporting event or assign people to boxcars, whatever needed doing. Glancing at his clipboard, he said to Max, "And you're George Foster?"

"No. I'm Chief Maxwell."

"Right," said Mr. Stevens. "Welcome."

I said to Stevens, "I'm Beth Penrose."

He said to me, "No. You're John Corey." He looked at Beth and said, "Good morning, Detective Penrose," then at George Foster and said, "Good morning. Mr. Foster of the FBI. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Welcome aboard. Please follow me."

We boarded *The Plum Runner,* and within a minute we were on our way to Plum Island. Stevens handed out blue clip-on passes, which we dutifully affixed to our clothing. We then followed our host to the top deck. No one else was there.

I sat facing the bow, with Beth to my right, Max to my left, Stevens across from me, and Nash and Foster on either side of him. Stevens remarked, "The scientists who work in biocontainment always ride up here unless the weather is really foul. You know, they don't see the sun for eight to ten hours." He added, "I asked that we have some privacy this morning."

I looked at Stevens, and our eyes met. The man really had one of those rare, never forgotten wax faces. I mean, nothing moved but the mouth, and the eyes bored right into you.

Paul Stevens addressed his guests. "Let me begin by saying that I knew Tom and Judy Gordon. They were well regarded on Plum. They treated all their fellow workers with courtesy and respect." His mouth made a sort of weird smile. "We'll sure miss them."

I had the sudden notion that this guy could be a government assassin. *Yeah.* What if it was the government that whacked Tom and Judy? Jeez, it just hit me that maybe the Gordons were going to blow the whistle on something. As my NYPD partner, Dom Fanelli, would say, *"Mama mia!"*

Stevens was going on. "As soon as I heard about the deaths last night, I called my security sergeant on the island and tried to determine if anything was missing from the labs, not that I would suspect the Gordons of such a thing, but— Well, we have standard operating procedures here. As far as I can determine, there is nothing

missing from any of the stored microorganisms or any stored samples of tissue, blood, or any other organic or biological material."

This statement was so patently self-serving and idiotic that no one even bothered to laugh. But Max did glance at me and shake his head. Messrs. Nash and Foster, however, were nodding as if they were buying Stevens's baloney. Thus encouraged, Pinocchio Stevens continued to put out the line of official bunk. I tuned him out and looked at the beautiful blue morning.

The one and a half miles of water between Orient Point and Plum Island is known as Plum Gut, another nautical term. Nautical terms give me a headache sometimes. I mean, what's wrong with regular English? Anyway, the Gut is a place where the currents get bad because the Long Island Sound and the open Atlantic sort of smack together. I was with the Gordons once, in their speedboat, when we got into a situation right about here with the wind, the tide, and the currents slapping the boat around. I really don't need a day like that on the water, if you know what I mean.

But today was okay, and the Gut was calm, and the boat was big. There was a little rocking, but I guess that can't be helped on the water, which is basically liquid and nowhere near as reliable as blacktop.

We were about a quarter mile from Plum Island when we saw a big white helicopter with red coast-guard markings off our starboard side. The guy was going low and slow, and leaning out the door was a man, secured by straps and carrying a rifle.

Mr. Stevens commented, "That's the deer patrol." He explained, "As a purely precautionary measure, we look for deer that might swim to or from Plum Island. We discourage deer from taking up residence or even visiting the island."

"Unless," I pointed out, "they wear the blue pass."

Mr. Stevens smiled again. He liked me. He liked the Gordons, too, and look what happened to them.

Beth asked Mr. Stevens, "Why do you discourage deer from swimming to the island?"

"Well, we have what's called a 'never leave' policy. That is, what-

ever comes on the island may never leave unless it's decontaminated." Mr. Stevens, realizing he'd frightened the tourists, said, "I don't mean to suggest the island is contaminated. I should explain. There are five levels of biohazard on the island. Level One, or Zone One, is the ambient air—all the places outside the biocontainment laboratories—which is safe. Zone Two is the shower area between the locker rooms and the laboratories. Level Three is the biocontainment labs where they work with infectious diseases. Level Four is deeper into the building and includes the pens where diseased animals are held and where the incinerators and dissection rooms are. Recently we have added a Level Five capability, the highest biocontainment level, because some of the organisms we were receiving from places such as Africa and the Amazon jungle were more virulent than suspected." He looked at us and said, sort of sotto voce, "In other words, we were getting samples infected with Ebola."

I said, "I think we can go back now."

Everyone smiled and tried to laugh. Ha-ha. Not funny.

Mr. Stevens continued. "The new laboratory is a state-of-the-art containment facility, but the old post–World War Two facility wasn't, unfortunately, as safe. So at that time, we adopted the 'never leave' policy as a precaution."

Beth asked, "Do you kill the deer?"

"Yes. They might pick up something on the island."

No one spoke. Then I asked, "How about birds?"

Mr. Stevens nodded and replied, "Birds could be a problem."

I asked my follow-up question. "And mosquitoes?"

"Oh, yes, mosquitoes could be a problem. But all lab animals are kept indoors, and all experiments are done in negative-air-pressure biocontainment labs. Nothing can escape."

Max asked, "How do you know?"

Mr. Stevens replied, "Because you're still alive."

As we approached the island, *The Plum Runner* slowed. I stood and leaned against the rail as the ferry slipped into a small cove that looked artificial. The island is shaped like a pork chop, and the cove

is at the fat end of the chop, as if someone took a little bite. Around the cove were a few tin warehouse-type structures.

Beth came up beside me and said softly. "Before you got to the ferry, I saw—"

"I was there. I saw it. Thanks."

"I think we're going to find out later today or maybe tomorrow that they did steal something, and we're going to be told what it is."

The ferry did a one eighty and backed into the slip. After the employees disembarked, we exited the ferry through the opening in the stern rail. And here we were on the mysterious island of Plum. It was windy, sunny, and cool on the dock.

There was only one boat tied up there, a thirtysomething-footer with a cabin, a searchlight, and an inboard motor. The name of this craft was *The Prune*. Someone had fun naming the ferry and this boat, and I didn't think it was Paul Stevens.

The employees who'd just disembarked boarded a white bus, which pulled away. Mr. Stevens said, "Please stay here." He strode off, then stopped to speak to a man dressed in an orange jumpsuit.

There was a weird feel to this place, like I somehow stepped into a James Bond movie, except that this place was real. I said to Max, "When do we meet Dr. No?"

Max laughed, and even Beth and Messrs. Nash and Foster smiled.

Beth addressed Max. "How is it that you never met Paul Stevens?"

Max replied, "Whenever there was a joint meeting of law-enforcement agencies, we'd invite the Plum Island security director as a courtesy. None of them ever showed."

Ted Nash said to me, "By the way, Detective Corey, I've discovered that you're not a Suffolk County detective."

"I never said I was."

"You and Chief Maxwell led me to believe you were."

Max said, "Detective Corey has been hired by the town of Southold as a consultant in this case."

"Really?" asked Mr. Nash. He looked at me and said, "You are a New York City homicide detective, wounded in the line of duty on April twelfth. You're currently on convalescent leave."

"Who asked you?"

Mr. Foster, ever the peacemaker, interjected. "We don't care, John. We just want to establish credentials and jurisdictions."

Beth said, "Okay, then, this is *my* jurisdiction and my case, and I have no problem with John Corey being here." She looked at Ted Nash and demanded, "Now that we know who John Corey works for, who do *you* work for?"

Nash paused, then said, "CIA."

"Thank you." She looked at George Foster and Ted Nash and informed them, "If either of you ever visits the crime scene again without signing in, I will notify the D.A. Understood?"

They nodded. Of course, they didn't mean it.

Paul Stevens returned and said, "The director, Dr. Zollner, is not available just yet. I understand from Chief Maxwell that you'd like to see some of the island, so we can drive around now. Please—"

"Hold on," I said, pointing to *The Prune*. "Is that yours?"

"Yes. It's a patrol boat."

"It's not patrolling."

"We have another one out now. All right, please follow—"

"Do you have vehicle patrols around the island?" I asked.

He obviously didn't like being questioned, but he replied, "Yes. Any more questions, Detective?"

"Yes. Did you authorize the Gordons to commute by boat?"

He replied, "The Gordons were senior staff and conscientious scientists. As long as they observed safety and security regulations and procedures, then I had no real problem with them commuting with their own boat." Mr. Stevens looked at his watch and said, "We're on a tight schedule. Follow me."

We followed the tightly wound Mr. Stevens to a white minibus and boarded. The driver wore the same blue uniform as the security guards, and in fact, I noticed he wore a holstered pistol.

Mr. Stevens said, "We'll take a spin around the island so you can get a feel for the challenges of securing an island with ten miles of beach and no fences." He added, "There's never been a security breach in the history of the island."

I asked Mr. Stevens, "What kind of side arms am I seeing in the holsters of your guards?"

He replied, "Army-issue Colt .45 automatics." He looked around the bus, then asked, "Did I say something interesting?"

Max informed him, "We think the murder weapon was a forty-five."

Beth said, "I'd like to do an inventory of your weapons and run a ballistics test on them. How many forty-fives do you have here?"

Paul Stevens said, "Twenty."

Max inquired, "Do you have one on you?"

Stevens patted his jacket and nodded. He looked at Beth and said, "It sounds like I'm being interrogated."

"No," Beth replied. "You're only being asked questions as a friendly witness. If you were being interrogated, you'd know it."

Mr. Stevens said, "All right. Before we move on, I'll give you my little speech that I give to visitors." He glanced at his stupid clipboard, then began in a rote tone. "Plum Island comprises eight hundred and forty acres of mostly forest and some pastureland and a parade ground, which we'll see later. The island is mentioned in the ships' logs of early Dutch and English sailors. The Dutch named the island after the beach plum that grows along the shore—Pruym Eyland in old Dutch if anyone is interested. From the beginning of the English presence the island was visited by a succession of pirates and privateers, who found the island's isolation very convenient."

I felt a sudden panic attack coming on. Here I was trapped in a small bus with this monotonal, monochromatic moron who was starting with Genesis, and we were only up to about 1700 or something, with three centuries to go, and the bus wasn't even moving, and I couldn't leave unless I shot my way out.

Finally I raised my hand and asked Stevens, "Is there, like, a brochure we can read later?"

Stevens smiled at me again. Why did I think he wanted to pull his .45 and empty his magazine in me? He said, "Bear with me, Detective. We have some time to kill anyway." He continued but sped up his words. "On the eve of the Spanish-American War the govern-

ment purchased one hundred and thirty acres of the island and established Fort Terry. We'll see the abandoned fort later."

I glanced at Beth and saw she was staring at Stevens. She turned toward me and seemed embarrassed that I'd caught her looking at me. She quickly turned back to Stevens. My heart skipped a beat.

Mr. Stevens was going on. "I should point out that there are over three hundred years of historical artifacts here on the island. We're negotiating an arrangement with the Peconic Historical Society for an experimental dig. In fact," he added, "the Gordons were members of the Peconic Historical Society, and they were the liaisons between the Department of Agriculture and the society. The Gordons and I had identified some good sites that we felt wouldn't compromise safety and security."

All of a sudden I was interested. Sometimes a word or phrase or name comes up in an investigation, and then it comes up again, and it becomes something to think about. Such was the Peconic Historical Society. I mean, my aunt June had belonged to it, and you see flyers and bulletins around, and they do fund-raisers, lectures, and all that stuff, and that's pretty normal. Then the Gordons, who don't know Plymouth Rock from a Scotch on the rocks, join up, and now Oberführer Stevens drops it into his spiel.

Mr. Stevens prattled on. "In 1929 there was a devastating outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in the United States, and the Department of Agriculture opened its first station on the island."

As Mr. Stevens went on about the Department of Agriculture, I realized that before he had mentioned the archaeological interest of the Gordons, he'd said something else that had pinged in my brain. I mean, think of a sonar wave moving through the water—the wave hits something and sends a ping back to the earphones. *Ping.* Something that Stevens said had pinged, but I was so bored senseless when he'd said it, I missed it.

Stevens announced, "All right, we'll drive around the island a bit."

The driver woke up and threw the minibus into gear. We drove around the area of the main research facility and came to a grouping of concrete buildings, with grass growing through the cement

pavement. Stevens said, "The big building was the main laboratory some years ago. After we moved out, we decontaminated it with poison gas, then sealed it forever."

As the bus drew closer, I saw that someone had painted in black on the concrete a huge skull and crossbones, and it struck me that this death's-head had actually two meanings: the Jolly Roger—the pirate flag that the Gordons had flown from their mast--as well as the symbol for poison or contamination.

Stevens continued. "In 1946 Congress authorized money to build a research facility. So Plum Island, which was shared by the Department of Agriculture and the army, was a natural site for the study of exotic animal diseases."

I asked, "Are only animal diseases studied here?"

"That's correct."

"Mr. Stevens, while we'd be upset if the Gordons stole foot-and-mouth virus and cattle herds of the United States were wiped out, that is not the reason we're here. Are there diseases in the Plum Island laboratory—crossover diseases—that can infect humans?"

Stevens looked at me, then said, "I'll say this. There was biological warfare research done in the early 1950s. But by 1954 the offensive biological warfare mission had changed to a defensive mission. The army was studying only ways to prevent our livestock industry from being purposely infected by the other side."

The bus turned onto a narrow gravel road, and we were now heading east along the north shore of Plum Island, with the coastline to the left and gnarled trees to the right. The beach was a pleasant stretch of sand and rocks, and you could imagine yourself as a Dutchman or Englishman in the year 16-whatever stepping onto this shore for the first time, trying to figure out how to screw the Indians out of the island. *Ping. Ping.* There it was again.

Stevens was prattling on about ecology and keeping the island as pristine and wild as possible. I was impressed with the loneliness of the place, the idea that you were unlikely to meet anyone on the beach or on the roads, which apparently had no purpose except for the one road that ran between the ferry and the main lab.

As if reading my mind, Mr. Stevens said, "These roads were all built by the army to connect Fort Terry to the coastal batteries. The deer patrols use the roads, but otherwise they're empty."

It occurred to me, of course, that the deer patrols and the security patrols were one and the same.

Beth asked, "How do boaters know not to land here?"

"There's a warning on all maps and charts," Mr. Stevens replied. "In addition, there are signs along all of the beaches. Plus, the patrols can deal with anchored or beached boats."

Beth asked, "What do you do with trespassers?"

Stevens replied, "We warn the boaters not to come near or on the island again. Second offenders are detained and turned over to Chief Maxwell." He looked at Max. "Right?"

"Right. We get one or two a year."

Paul Stevens explained, "It's not dangerous if people stray onto the island. But because of the proximity of the biocontainment areas, we'd rather keep the island free of unauthorized people."

I couldn't help but point out, "From what I can see, Mr. Stevens, a boatload of even semi-competent terrorists could land on the island some night, knock off your handful of guards, and blow the place sky-high, releasing deadly bugs into the environment."

Mr. Stevens replied, "I can only tell you that there's more security here than meets the eye."

"I hope so."

"Count on it. Why don't you try it one night?"

I replied, "I'll bet you a hundred bucks I can get into your office, steal your high school equivalency diploma from the wall, and have it hanging in my office the next morning."

Mr. Stevens kept staring at me, his dead waxy face immobile.

I said to him, "Let me ask you the question we're all here to have answered. Could Tom and Judy Gordon have smuggled microorganisms off this island? Tell us the truth."

Paul Stevens replied, "Theoretically, they could have. But why would they?"

"Money," I replied.

"They really didn't seem the type," said Mr. Stevens. "The Gordons took nothing from here that would hurt any living thing. I'll bet my job on that."

"You already have. And your life."

I noticed that Ted Nash and George Foster were mostly quiet. They were probably afraid they'd sound sort of like "Been there, done that, got the T-shirt."

Mr. Stevens said, "We're approaching Fort Terry. We can get out here and look around."

The bus stopped, and we all got out.

IT WAS a nice morning, and the sun was warmer here in the middle of the island. Fort Terry had no walls and actually resembled a deserted town, with a brick jailhouse, a rambling two-story brick barracks with a veranda, a few turn-of-the-century buildings, and a white clapboard chapel on a hill.

Mr. Stevens pointed to another brick building and said, "That's the only building still used—the firehouse."

Max commented, "This is a long distance to the lab."

"Yes," Stevens replied, "but the new laboratory is virtually fireproof and has its own internal fire-fighting system." He added, "These fire trucks are used mostly for brush fires and fires in buildings without biocontainment."

Max said, "But a fire or a hurricane could destroy the power generators that filter the biocontainment areas. Right?"

"Anything is possible. This is the modern world, full of unimaginable horrors—chemical, biological, and nuclear nightmares waiting to clean the slate for the next evolving species."

I looked at Paul Stevens with new interest. It occurred to me that he was nuts.

In front of the barracks was a field of cut grass that swept down to the water some distance away. Stevens explained, "That was the parade ground."

Flocks of Canada geese were strutting around the field, cackling and honking. The old parade ground ended abruptly in a steep

drop to a rocky beach below, and we found ourselves standing at the edge, overlooking the sea. It was a breathtaking view, but it highlighted the otherworldly loneliness of this place.

Stevens drew our attention to a big boulder. Sitting in a cleft of the boulder was a rusty cannonball. He said, "That's from about the time of the Revolution. It's one of the things the Gordons dug up."

I asked, "Where did they find it?"

"Right around here, I guess. They dug a lot around this beach and the parade ground."

"I didn't know the Gordons were into digging. I never saw anything they uncovered."

"Well, they had to leave everything here. It's federal land."

This was interesting, and Nash and Foster were starting to listen, which is not what I wanted, so I changed the subject by saying to Stevens, "The bus driver is trying to get your attention."

Stevens looked at the bus, but the driver was just staring up at a flock of geese. Stevens glanced at his watch and said, "Let's see the rest of the island. Then we have an appointment with Dr. Zollner."

We boarded the bus and headed east again, out toward the spit of land that was the curved bone of the pork chop. The beach was magnificent, about two miles of untrodden sand washed by blue waters. At the narrow end of the island the bus stopped, and we all got out and found ourselves in the middle of an amazing old ruin. Wherever I looked, I saw massive concrete fortifications overgrown with vines and brush—pillboxes, bunkers, gun emplacements, tunnels, and huge three-foot-thick walls with rusty iron doors.

So John, Max, Beth, Ted, and George had some fun climbing around the ruins, with Mr. Stevens always close by. At one point we walked along a long brick roadway that sloped down to a pair of steel doors. The doors were ajar, and we all went inside. It was dark, cool, damp, and probably crawling with things.

Stevens followed us and said, "This leads into a huge ammunition magazine." His voice echoed in the black void. "There was a narrow-gauge railroad on the island that carried the ammunition from the harbor to these underground storage areas."

I asked him, "Could the Gordons have set up a clandestine lab in a place like this?"

Mr. Stevens replied, "As I said, I don't suspect the Gordons of anything. But because this possibility was raised, I'm having my men search this entire complex."

I said, "Send your driver for flashlights. I'd like to look around."

There was a silence in the darkness; then Stevens said, "After you see Dr. Zollner, we can come back here and explore the underground rooms and passages if you wish."

We walked back into the sunlight, and Mr. Stevens said, "We can get back on the bus now."

I noticed that one of the steep rises on which the fortifications were built had recently eroded, exposing a reddish streak of what looked like rust. It looked very much like the stuff on Tom and Judy's running shoes. Interesting.

The bus headed west, back toward the area of the ferry dock and the main lab. George Foster asked Stevens, "You're quite sure the Gordons left at noon yesterday?"

"Absolutely. They were seen by my men heading out in their boat."

I asked, "If your patrol boat had seen the Gordons' boat anchored near the island, would your people have chased them off?"

"No. The Gordons did sometimes anchor and fish or swim off the coast of Plum. They were well known to the patrols."

I didn't know the Gordons were such avid fishermen.

The bus went past the ferry dock, then swung north, stopping in an oval-shaped driveway in front of the main research facility.

The curved front of the new two-story art deco–style building was made of some sort of pink-and-brown block. A big sign rising from the lawn said DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE.

We all got out of the bus, and Paul Stevens said, "All right, we can go inside now. Follow me."

The semicircular lobby of the Plum Island research laboratory was two stories high, with a mezzanine running around the central staircase. It was a light and airy space, pleasant and welcoming.

There was a reception counter, and we had to sign in and exchange our blue passes for white ones. An attractive young lady with a knee-length skirt had come down the staircase, and she introduced herself as Donna Alba, Dr. Zollner's assistant. She smiled and said, "Dr. Zollner will be with you shortly. Meanwhile, I'll show you around."

Paul Stevens said to us, "I'll take this opportunity to check in with my office." He looked at me and said, "Please stay with Ms. Alba at all times." He went up the stairs, stopping, I'm sure, at Dr. Zollner's to report on the five intruders.

I looked at Donna Alba—mid-twenties, brunette, good face and body, blue skirt, white blouse, and running shoes. She was attractive enough so that I recalled she'd been on the ferry with us this morning, and she was therefore not yet acquainted with Messrs. Nash and Foster and was therefore probably not on the inside of any cover-up.

Donna began. "Welcome to the Plum Island Animal Disease Center research facility." Her face tried to remain smiley, but I could see it was forced. She said to us, "I'm very . . . It's terrible what happened. I really liked the Gordons. Everyone liked them." She glanced around, like people do in police states, and said, "I'm not supposed to comment on any of that. But I thought I should say how I felt." Then she said, "I'll show you around a bit. Follow me."

We did a little walk around the lobby, and Donna pointed out maps showing outbreaks of this and that; there were charts, graphs, and blown-up news articles from around the world about mad-cow disease, something called rinderpest and swine fever, and other gruesome diseases. Donna then drew our attention to the two doors in the rear of the lobby. The doors were painted that peculiar warning yellow, and they stood out against the colors of the lobby, which were mostly shades of gray. On the left door was a sign that said LOCKER ROOM—WOMEN and, on the right, LOCKER ROOM—MEN. Both doors said AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

Donna said, "These doors lead to the biocontainment areas."

Max inquired, "Are there any other ways in or out of the biocontainment areas?"

Donna replied, "You can go in through the service entrance where the animals and supplies are brought in. But you can't leave that way. Everything and everybody that leaves has to go through the decontamination area, which includes the showers."

"Is the shower co-ed?" I inquired.

She laughed. "Of course not."

So we walked upstairs for a tour of the two wings that flanked the two-story lobby. Everything was painted dove gray or dark gray. Almost all the doors in the long corridors were closed, and they were all numbered, but none of them had the name of a person or function on them, except the lavatories. Good security, I thought. I was impressed with Paul Stevens's paranoid mind.

We entered the research library, where a few egghead types were browsing through the stacks or reading at tables. Donna retrieved a handful of brochures and other propaganda from a long table and handed them out to us. The trifold brochures had titles such as "Hog Cholera," "African Swine Fever," and "African Horse Sickness." I couldn't wait to get home and read this stuff, and in fact, I said to Donna, "Can I have two more rinderpest brochures, please?"

"Two more? Sure." She retrieved them for me.

I walked over to a big bulletin board, where Beth and Max were reading the few scraps of paper pinned to the cork. Out of earshot of the feds I said, "This place has been picked clean already."

Max asked, "By who?"

Beth said, "John and I saw our two friends getting *off* the Plum Island ferry this morning. They've already been here."

Max seemed surprised, then annoyed. He said, "That's against the law."

Donna, in her most accommodating voice, interrupted our discussion and said, "We're a little behind schedule now. Let's go see the duty office. Then we'll see Dr. Zollner."

We followed Donna into the east wing of the building—past the open staircase we'd come up—to a door marked "237." She punched in a code on a keypad and opened the door, revealing a large, windowless room. She said, "This is the duty office."

We all entered. A young man sat with his back to us, talking on a telephone.

Donna said, "That's Kenneth Gibbs, Paul Stevens's assistant. Kenneth is duty officer today." Gibbs turned and waved at us.

On countertops that ran along all the walls were radio transmitters, a computer terminal, a TV set, two fax machines, telephones, cell phones, a Teletype, and a few other electronic gizmos. Two ceiling-mounted TV cameras scanned the room.

On the wall were all sorts of maps, radio frequencies, memos, a duty roster, and so forth. This was Paul Stevens's operation—command, control, and communication, known as CCC, or C-Three.

Gibbs put the phone down and joined us. We did the intro thing. Gibbs was tall, thirtysomething, blue eyes and short blond hair like his boss, neatly pressed trousers and shirt, with a blue tie. A blue blazer hung over one of the chairs. Gibbs said, "I can answer any questions you may have about this office."

Beth said to Donna, "Would you mind leaving us with Mr. Gibbs for a few minutes?"

Donna looked at Gibbs, who nodded. She then went out into the corridor.

I asked Mr. Gibbs, "What would you do if there were armed intruders on the island?"

He looked at me and asked, "You mean like terrorists?"

"Yeah. Or worse, disgruntled postal workers."

He was not amused. "Well, if our security people couldn't handle it, we would call the coast guard."

"What if this room was knocked out first thing?"

"There's a second CCC in the building. I thought you were investigating a murder?"

I love rent-a-cops giving me lip. I said, "That's correct. When was the last time you saw the Gordons?"

"Let me think—"

"How well did you know the Gordons?"

"Not well."

"Did you ever have occasion to speak to them officially?"

"No. Well . . ."

"Well?"

"A few times. The Gordons would come here sometimes on Sundays and anchor off one of the beaches on the south side of the island, then swim to shore, trailing a raft with picnic stuff. We have no problem with that, but their boat presented a problem."

"What sort of problem?"

"Well, it attracted other pleasure boaters. So I spoke to them, and we tried to work it out."

"How did you try to work it out?"

"The easiest solution would have been for them to come into the cove and take one of our vehicles to the remote end of the island. But they wanted to do it their way. More fun, they said. More spontaneous and adventurous."

"Who runs this island? Stevens, Zollner, or the Gordons?"

"We have to pamper the scientists here, or they get upset. The joke among the nonscientists is that if you annoy a scientist, you wind up getting mysteriously sick with a three-day virus."

Everyone got a chuckle out of that.

"What were the Gordons doing on the island?"

Gibbs shrugged. "They ran around the ruins a lot. They were collecting things. Mostly musket balls and arrowheads, some odds and ends from around the time of the Spanish-American War. Mostly junk. It's all catalogued and stored in the basement."

Beth asked, "I understand that the Gordons were organizing an official dig. Do you know about that?"

"Yeah. A bunch of people from the Peconic Historical Society were trying to work it out with the USDA and the Department of the Interior." He added, "Interior has the final say about artifacts and all that."

I asked Mr. Gibbs, "Didn't it ever occur to you that the archaeological stuff was a cover?"

"I guess in retrospect . . . Hey, everybody's on my case, like I should have suspected something. Everybody forgets that those two were golden. They could do whatever they wanted. I don't

need Monday morning quarterbacking." He added, "I did my job."

Probably he did. And, by the way, I heard the ping again.

Beth asked, "Did any of your people see the Gordons' boat after it left yesterday at noon?"

"No. I asked."

"In other words, you can be certain that the boat was not anchored off this island yesterday afternoon?"

"No, I can't be certain of that."

Max inquired, "How often do your boats make the circuit of the island?"

Gibbs answered, "We usually use one of the two boats. At about ten to twelve knots you're talking about a complete circle every forty to sixty minutes."

Beth said, "So if a boat were lying a half mile or so away from Plum Island and a person aboard was watching with binoculars, he or she would see one of those patrol boats, right? And if that person or persons knew the routine, he, she, or they would know they had forty to sixty minutes to anchor, get to shore, accomplish whatever, and get back to their boat without anyone seeing them."

"Possible, but you're forgetting the helicopter patrols and the vehicle patrols that skirt the beach at random. Also, if you want me to be candid, we have electronic devices that do most of the work."

I asked Gibbs, "Where are the monitors?"

"In the basement."

"Where is Mr. Stevens's office?"

"Room two fifty."

The intercom buzzed, and a male voice came out of the speaker, saying, "Dr. Zollner will see his guests now."

We met Donna out in the corridor, and as we walked, I commented to her, "These doors don't have names or titles on them."

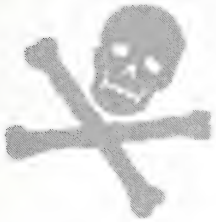
"Security," she replied tersely.

"Which is Paul Stevens's office?"

"Room two two five," she replied.

Proving once again that the best security is a lie. She led us to the end of a corridor and opened door number 200.

Chapter Four



DONNA said, "Please have a seat. Dr. Zollner will be with us in a moment."

We all sat. The waiting room was the same dove gray with dark gray trim and gray carpet as the rest of the structure. You could get sensory deprivation in this place.

The door to the right opened, and a big, beefy, bearded man in a white shirt and blue tie appeared. Everyone stood. I recognized Dr. Zollner from a photo in the lobby. He looked at his guests and said, "Well, come in, come in."

We went in, went in.

Dr. Zollner's corner office was big, but the furniture, walls, and carpet were the same as all the others. Still standing, we introduced ourselves, using our titles and job descriptions. We all pressed the flesh, and Zollner smiled brightly. He said, "So welcome. I trust Mr. Stevens and Ms. Alba have been helpful?"

He had a slight German accent, white hair and a white Vandyke beard, and thick glasses. In fact, he looked like Burl Ives.

Dr. Zollner invited us to sit—"Sit, sit"—and we sat, sat. He began by saying, "I am still in shock over this tragedy. The Gordons were brilliant scientists and very well respected among their colleagues." He added, "I hope you solve this case very quickly."

Beth replied, "So do we."

Zollner continued. "Also, let me apologize for keeping you waiting. I have been on the phone all morning."

Beth said to Dr. Zollner, "Can you describe to us the duties of the Gordons?"

"Yes. They were involved mostly with . . . genetic research—genetic alteration of viruses to make them unable to cause disease

but able to stimulate the body's immune system. It's a new type of vaccine. Much safer than using a weakened virus."

"What *specifically* were they working on?"

"Ebola."

No one said anything; then Dr. Zollner said, "Simian Ebola, of course. Monkey Ebola." He added, "The Gordons were trying to genetically alter a simian Ebola virus so that it would not cause disease, but would produce an immune response in the animal. This is an important first step toward a human Ebola vaccine."

I asked, "Have you done an inventory of your bugs?"

"Yes. But to be honest, there is no way we could account for every specimen. Yes, yes, I know what you're getting at. You believe the Gordons took some very exotic and deadly organisms and perhaps sold them to . . . well, let's say a foreign power. But I assure you, they would not do that."

"Why not?"

"Because it's too terrible to contemplate."

"That's very reassuring," I said. "Hey, we can go home now."

Dr. Zollner leaned across his desk and said in his slight accent, "I have another theory, which I will share with you. The Gordons, who were wonderful people but somewhat carefree with money, stole one of the new vaccines they were working on. I believe they were further advanced on the research of a vaccine than they led us to believe. Their purpose, of course, would be to sell this to perhaps a foreign pharmaceutical firm. Perhaps they intended to take a job with a private firm and pretend to make the discovery there. Then they would get a very handsome bonus amounting to millions of dollars. And the royalties could be tens of millions of dollars, depending on the vaccine. I only wonder what it was they discovered, and I worry that we will not recover it. I wonder, too, who killed them, though I'm sure I know why. So what do you think?"

Ted Nash spoke first. "I think you're right, Doctor."

George Foster nodded. "We had the right idea but the wrong bug. Vaccine. Of course."

Max, too, nodded and said, "Makes sense. I'm relieved."

Beth spoke. "I think we can stop looking for terrorists and start looking for another type of person or persons."

I looked at Dr. Zollner, and he looked back at me. He said to me, "Detective Corey? You have a contrary thought perhaps?"

"Oh, no. I'm with the majority on this one. I knew the Gordons." I asked him, "They'd have had to plan this for some time?"

"Oh, yes. As soon as they were onto something, they'd begin making false notes and at the same time keeping legitimate ones. It's the scientific equivalent of double bookkeeping."

"There are no checks or controls?"

"Well, there are, of course. But the Gordons were each other's research partner. Also, their area of expertise—viral genetic engineering—is somewhat exotic and not easily checked by others. I spent an hour in their lab this morning looking for something that was not right, but they wouldn't leave anything incriminating around."

But if yesterday was to be the culmination of the Gordons' secret work, then they would have sanitized the place yesterday morning or the day before. But that supposed that I believed all of this stuff about an Ebola vaccine, and I wasn't sure I did.

Zollner was saying, "As I told you, if anything is missing, it is an antiviral vaccine. That is what the Gordons were working on. You'll see. Six or seven months from now some pharmaceutical company or some foreign government will announce an Ebola vaccine, and the World Health Organization will purchase two hundred million doses to start with, and when you discover who is getting the richest from this vaccine, you will discover your murderer."

Max said, "You're hired, Doctor."

Everyone smiled and chuckled. We all wanted to believe, and we were thrilled that we weren't going to wake up with terminal bluetongue or something, and in truth, no one was focusing closely on the case now. Except me.

Zollner stood. "Well, let's go to the cafeteria. Lunch is on me."

On the way, Dr. Zollner was going on about the facility's foreign cooperative programs in places like Israel, Kenya, Mexico, Canada, and England. "In fact," he said, "the Gordons went to England.

Pirbright Laboratory, south of London. That's our sister lab there."

I asked, "When did they go to England?"

"Let's see. . . . May of last year. I recall that I envied them going to England in May."

"I assume the government paid for the Gordons' trip."

He thought a moment, then said, "Actually, they took a week in London at their own expense. Yes, I remember that."

I nodded. What *I* didn't remember was any unusually large credit card bills or large cash withdrawals in May or June of last year. I wondered where they'd spent the week.

Zollner went to a bright red door, on which were plastered six OSHA-type signs as follows: BIOHAZARD, RADIOACTIVE, CHEMICAL WASTE, HIGH VOLTAGE, POISON HAZARD, and UNTREATED HUMAN WASTE. He opened the door and announced, "Lunchroom."

Inside the plain white cement-block room were a dozen tables, a sink, a refrigerator, microwave oven, bulletin boards covered with messages, and a water cooler and coffeemaker. Sitting on a counter was a fax machine, a menu of the day's fare, and paper and pencil. For the first time since I left the hospital, I ordered Jell-O, and for the first time in my life I skipped the meat dishes. No one else seemed particularly hungry, and they all ordered salads.

I regarded Dr. Zollner as I slurped my lime Jell-O. I liked the guy. He was friendly, hospitable, and smart. He was lying through his teeth, of course, but other people had forced him to do that. Probably Foster and Nash, for starters, and God knew who else in Washington had briefed Dr. Z. on the phone all morning while we were rambling around the ruins and getting brochures on rinderpest. There was a lot of smoke and mirrors in this place, and I'm sure there always had been.

On the way back to the lobby after lunch, I said to Dr. Z., "I'm very impressed with your operation, and I thank you for your time."

"I enjoyed your company, Mr. Corey. I regret having met you under these sad circumstances."

Beth said to Dr. Zollner, "We reserve the right to revisit the island anytime until this case is closed."

"As far as I'm concerned, you're welcome anytime." He added, "But it's not my decision."

Dr. Z. bid us a fond adieu with not a hint of good riddance. A real gentleman.

I STOOD on the top deck of the ferry and watched the green shore of Plum Island recede into the distance. The sun felt good on my skin. I was enjoying the ride and the smell of the sea.

Beth Penrose came up on deck and leaned back against the rail, her face into the sun.

I said to her, "You predicted what Zollner was going to say."

She nodded. "It fits the facts, and it resolves the problem we had with believing the Gordons were capable of stealing deadly organisms." She added, "The Gordons stole something good. Something profitable. Money is the motivator. Saint-seducing gold, as Shakespeare said."

"Right. Now everyone can rest easy. No panic, no hysteria."

We looked at each other, and Beth said, "It's all a lie, of course."

"Yeah. But it's a really good lie. This lie takes the heat off Plum Island. Meanwhile, the FBI and CIA can work the case quietly without us and without media attention. You, Max, and I just got dealt out of the Plum Island part of this case."

"Right. Though we still have a double homicide to solve."

"That's right. And I think I'm going to miss Ted Nash."

She smiled, then asked, "What did you think of Stevens?"

"The right man for the right job."

"How about Zollner?"

"I liked him."

She nodded. "Is he running scared?"

"No. It's all under control. Stevens and Zollner have made their deals with the government."

"That was my impression. The cover-up was conceived, written, and directed late last night, early this morning in Washington and on Plum Island. This morning we saw the play."

"You got it."

The sea got a little choppier in the middle of the Gut, and I steadied myself against the rail. I looked at Beth, who had her eyes closed now and, with her head tilted back, was catching a few UVs.

Neither of us spoke for a minute; then she opened her blue-green eyes and inquired, "Why don't we believe the Gordons stole a miracle vaccine in order to make a fortune?"

"Because that still leaves too many questions unanswered. First, what's with the powerboat? You don't need a one-hundred-thousand-dollar boat to score a golden vaccine. Right?"

"Okay. What else?"

"Well, I'm no geopolitical expert, but Ebola is pretty rare, and the chances of the World Health Organization or some African governments ordering this stuff in quantity seem a little remote. People are dying in Africa of malaria and tuberculosis, and no one is buying two hundred million doses of anything for them."

"Okay. And how about the archaeology on Plum?" she asked. "Why did Paul Stevens give us that?"

"Because it's public knowledge, and we'd hear about it soon enough. But it has nothing to do with the science of archaeology. It was a cover for something, a reason to go to remote parts of the island. And then we have the red clay that I saw on the Gordons' running shoes and which I saw on Plum. The route from the main lab to the dock has no place where you could pick up red clay in your treads."

She nodded. "I'll request soil samples. They can decontaminate them if they get hung up on the 'never leave' policy."

I explained about the checkbook entry and my conversation with Margaret Wiley. I concluded, "I'm not a country boy, but I don't think people without bucks spend twenty-five G's just to have their own trees to hug, and the fact that the Gordons never told me they owned a piece of land is significant. Same with the archaeological digs. Things that don't make sense need explaining."

"Thank you, Detective Corey."

I replied, "I don't mean to lecture, but I give a class at John Jay, and sometimes a line or two slips out like that."

She regarded me a moment, then said, "I never know if you're pulling my leg or not."

"I really do teach at John Jay." This is John Jay College of Criminal Justice in Manhattan, one of the best such schools in the country, and I suppose she had a credibility problem with John Corey as professor.

She asked, "What do you teach?"

"Practical homicide investigation. Scene of the crime and that kind of thing. Friday nights. It's the ultimate murder-mystery evening. You're welcome to sit in if I ever get back into it. Maybe January. The class is always overflowing. I'm very entertaining."

"I'm sure of it." We looked at each other and smiled. Clearly we liked each other, despite some run-ins and misunderstandings.

The ferry was slowing as it approached the dock. I asked Beth, "Have you spoken to the Murphys yet?"

"No. Max did. They're on my list for today."

"Good. I'll join you."

She took her notebook out of her bag and began perusing the pages. She said, "I need the computer printouts that you borrowed."

"They're at my place."

"Okay." She scanned another page. "I've asked the D.A. for a subpoena for the Gordons' phone records for the last two years."

"Right. Also, get a list of licensed pistol holders in Southold Township."

"You think the murder weapon might be locally registered?"

"Maybe. And if you round up the hardware on Plum Island, make sure the county does the ballistics tests, not the FBI."

"I know."

She detailed a bunch of other odds and ends that needed doing, and I could see she had a neat and orderly mind. She was also intuitive and inquisitive. She only lacked experience, I thought, to make a really good detective. To make a great detective, she had to learn to loosen up, to get people to talk freely and too much. She came on a little too grim and strong. "Loosen up."

She looked up from her notebook. "I'm a little anxious about this case."

"Everyone is. Loosen up."

"I'll try." She smiled. "I can do impersonations. I can do you. Want to see?"

"No."

She got all slouchy and wiggly, shoved one hand in her pocket, and scratched her chest with the other, then spoke in a bass voice with a New York City accent, "Hey, like, what's goin' on with this case? Ya know? What's with this bozo, Nash? Huh? The guy don't know a cow pie from a pizza pie. The guy's—"

"Thank you," I said coolly.

She actually laughed, then said to me, "Loosen up."

"I do not speak with such a pronounced New York accent."

"Well, it sounds like it out here."

I was a little annoyed but a little amused, too, I guess.

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes. Then the ferry hit the rubber bumpers, and the crewmen threw down two lines. Beth moved toward the stairway. "What's your cell-phone number?"

I gave it to her, and she said, "We'll split up in the parking lot, and I'll call you in about twenty minutes."

We joined Max, Nash, and Foster in the parking field. Chief Sylvester Maxwell of the Southold PD said to everyone, "I'm satisfied that the most troubling part of this case has been cleared up. I have other duties, so I'm leaving Detective Penrose to work the homicide angle."

Mr. Ted Nash of the CIA said, "I'm satisfied, too, and I'm going to recommend that my agency and I be relieved of this case."

Mr. George Foster of the FBI said, "It appears that government property has been stolen, so I'm heading back to Washington to report. The local FBI office will take charge of this case, and someone will be contacting you, Chief." He looked at Beth. "Or you."

Detective Elizabeth Penrose of the Suffolk County PD replied, "Well, it looks like I'm it. I thank you all for your help."

We were ready to part, but Ted and I had to get in a few last friendly licks. He went first and said to me, "I truly hope we meet again, Detective Corey."

"Oh, I'm sure we will, Ted. Next time try to impersonate a woman. That should be easier for you than an agriculture guy."

He stared at me and said, "By the way, I forgot to mention that I know your boss—Detective Lieutenant Wolfe."

"Small world. He's a jerk, too. But put in a good word for me."

"I'll be sure to report that you're looking fit to return to duty."

Foster interrupted and said, "It's been an interesting and intense twenty-four hours, and I have no doubt the local police will bring this case to a satisfactory conclusion."

I said, "In summation, long day, good job, good luck."

Everyone was shaking hands now, even me. Within a minute Max, Beth, Nash, and Foster were gone, and I was standing alone in the parking field. *Weird.* Last night everyone thought the apocalypse had arrived. And now no one gave a rat's tail about two dead vaccine thieves in the morgue. Right?

I began walking to my car. I was sure that certain agencies of the federal government had put together a cover, and it was good enough for the media, the nation, and the world. But it wasn't good enough for Detectives John Corey and Elizabeth Penrose.

I DROVE west on Main Road, my radio tuned to easy listening, rural scenes sliding by—blue skies, gulls, the whole nine yards, the best that the third planet from the sun has to offer. The car phone rang, and I answered, "Dial-a-stud. May I help you?"

"Meet me at the Murphy residence," said Detective Penrose. She hung up.

I hate bossy women. Nevertheless, I drove to the Murphy house and spotted Detective Penrose sitting out front in her unmarked black Ford LTD. I parked my Jeep a few houses away. I killed the engine and got out. To the right of the Murphys' house the crime scene was still taped off, and there was one Southold PD out front.

Beth got out and said, "I just finished a long verbal to my boss. Everyone seems happy with the Ebola vaccine angle."

"Did you indicate to your boss that you think it's a crock?"

"No. Let's leave that alone. Let's solve a double murder."

We went to the Murphys' front door and rang the bell. The house was a 1960s ranch, original condition but decently maintained. A woman of about seventy answered the door, and we introduced ourselves. She smiled at Beth and showed us inside. She disappeared toward the back of the house and called out, "Ed! Police again!"

She came back into the living room and indicated a love seat. I found myself cheek to cheek with Beth.

Mrs. Agnes Murphy sat in a rocker facing us.

I asked her, "Did you like the Gordons?"

The question threw her, as it was supposed to. She got her thoughts together and replied, "We didn't know them very well, but they were mostly quiet."

Edgar Murphy entered, wiping his hands on a rag. He had been in the garage, he explained, working on his power mower. Edgar sat in a recliner, which he actually reclined, so he was looking up at the ceiling. I tried to make eye contact with him, but it was hard to do given our relative positions.

Beth did some prelim but related some of the details and times wrong on purpose, and Mr. Murphy corrected her, demonstrating that he had good short-term memory. They seemed like reliable witnesses, but as Beth and I spoke to Edgar and Agnes, it was obvious that there was little new to be learned regarding the bare facts. The Murphys were both in their sunroom at five thirty p.m. watching TV when they heard the Gordons' boat.

Beth asked, "And you're sure you didn't hear any noise that could be a gunshot?"

"Nope," Edgar Murphy replied.

I said, "Okay, you watched TV for ten more minutes. What made you get up?"

"It was one of Agnes's shows. Some stupid talk show."

"So you headed next door to chat with Tom Gordon."

"I needed to borrow an extension cord." Edgar explained that he went through a gap in the hedges, stepped onto the Gordons' wooden deck, and there were Tom and Judy, dead as doornails.

"Their eyes was open, but no breathing, no moaning. Nothing."

I began another line of questions. I asked Mrs. Murphy, "Did the Gordons have much company?"

She replied, "A fair amount. They did a lot of cooking outside. Always had a few people over."

We went round and round, asking about the Gordons' habits and so forth. After a few minutes Mrs. Murphy opined, "They were a real good-looking couple."

I picked up the hint. "Do you think he had a girlfriend?"

"Oh, I didn't mean—"

"Did she have a boyfriend?"

"Well . . . I'm not saying it was a boyfriend or anything."

"Tell us about it."

And she did. Once, back in June, when Tom was at work and Judy was home, a good-looking bearded gentleman came over in a white sports car and left an hour later. Interesting, but not evidence of a torrid affair that could lead to a crime of passion.

Mr. and Mrs. Murphy loved to talk. She rocked; he played with the lever on the chair and kept changing inclines. During one of his flat-out positions he asked me, "What'd they do? Steal a whole bunch of germs to wipe out the world?"

"No. If anything, a vaccine that's worth a lot of money."

Beth said, "Let me be blunt, Mr. Murphy. Some people think the Gordons were running drugs. What do you think?"

He replied without hesitation, "Could be. They was out in the boat at odd hours. Wouldn't be surprised."

"Did you have a key to their house?"

I saw Mrs. Murphy shoot a glance at Mr. Murphy. Then Mr. Murphy said, "Yeah, we had the key. We kept an eye on the house for them. But last week we saw a locksmith truck there, and when the feller left, well, I just went over to try my key, and it didn't work no more. I sort of expected Tom to give me a new key, but I never got one. He's got the key to my house. You know?" He added, "Now I'm wondering if they was hiding something in there."

"Did anyone ever visit the Gordons by boat?" Beth asked.

"Now and then I'd see a boat at their dock."

"Did you know who the boats belonged to?"

"Nope. But one time it was a boat like theirs."

"Did you see anyone on board?" Beth asked.

"Nope."

I asked them, "If we showed you photos of people, could you tell me if you've ever seen them on the Gordons' property?"

"Maybe."

We put another half hour into the questioning, but the yield was diminishing. In fact, Mr. Murphy had accomplished the near impossible by falling asleep during a police interview.

We stood, and Beth gave Mrs. Murphy her card. "Remember," Beth said, "I am the investigating detective assigned to this case. This is my partner. Chief Maxwell is assisting us. You should not speak to anyone else about this case."

Mrs. Murphy nodded. She walked us to the front door and said, "I'm scared. What if they want to kill the witnesses?"

"Did you or Mr. Murphy witness the murder?"

"No, but the killer might *think* we witnessed it."

I glanced at Beth. She said, "I'll have a patrol car keep an eye on things. If you feel nervous or hear anything, dial 911. Don't worry."

Agnes Murphy nodded.

I opened the door and got out into the sunlight. I said to Beth, "Let's return to the scene of the crime."

We went through the gap in the hedges. From where we stood, I could see the flagpole in the Gordons' yard. The Jolly Roger still flew from the mast, and the two signal pennants hung from the crossbeam. I asked Beth, "Can you draw those pennants?"

"Sure." She took her notebook and pen and sketched them. "You think that's relevant? A signal?"

"Why not? They're signal pennants."

We walked up to the top level of the deck and stopped a few feet from the two chalk outlines. I said, "It would have been easier for the killer to do the shooting inside the house rather than out here. But he *chose* this spot. In the house the rounds would have lodged somewhere, and maybe he wouldn't have been able to recover them.

So he goes for two close-up head shots with a large-caliber pistol and with nothing between the exit wounds and the deep bay."

She nodded. "That changes the profile of the killer. He's not a hophead or an assassin with an unregistered piece. It's a good citizen with a registered pistol. Is that what you're suggesting?"

"Right. And probably an automatic pistol as opposed to a revolver, because revolvers are nearly impossible to silence."

Beth said, "How does a good citizen with a registered pistol get an illegal silencer?"

"Good question. Like anything else in this case, there's always one inconsistency that screws up a good theory."

"Right." She added, "And then there are those twenty .45-caliber automatics on Plum Island."

"Indeed there are."

"So who killed the Gordons?" she asked.

"Beats the hell out of me," I replied.

WE STOOD in the sun-dappled lane near Beth Penrose's black PD. It was approaching six o'clock. I said, "How about cocktails?"

She replied, "Can you find Margaret Wiley's house?"

"Maybe. Is she serving cocktails?"

"We'll ask. Jump in." I got in. She started the big engine, and off we went, through Nassau Point, across the causeway, and onto the mainland of the North Fork.

"Which way?" she asked.

"Right, I think."

It was pleasant with the windows down, the setting sun, the clean air, and all of that. We were in farm and vineyard country now. On Lighthouse Road, I said, "Go slow, and we'll read numbers."

The small road had a scattering of small houses on both sides, surrounded by vineyards. We came to a brick cottage whose mailbox said WILEY. Beth stopped the car. "I guess this is it."

We got out and went up a stone path to the front door. There was no bell, and we knocked. We waited. There was a car parked under a big oak tree alongside the house, so we walked around to

the back. A thin woman of about seventy wearing a flowered summer dress was puttering around in a vegetable garden. I called out, "Mrs. Wiley?"

She looked up from her garden, then came toward us. I said, "I'm Detective John Corey. I phoned you last night. This is my partner, Detective Beth Penrose." Beth showed her badge.

Mrs. Wiley looked at me and said, "You called very late."

"I couldn't sleep. These murders kept me awake. I apologize."

"I don't suppose I want an apology. What can I do for you?"

"Well," I said, "we were interested in the piece of land that you sold to the Gordons."

"Sit over here." She led us to a grouping of Adirondack chairs beneath a weeping willow. We all sat. I could smell the Long Island Sound, about a quarter mile away, and I thought I caught a whiff of the grapes from the nearby vineyard.

Margaret Wiley was the no-nonsense, old-family, get-to-the-point type. I'm a good interrogator because I can pick out personalities and types and tailor my approach accordingly.

I said to Mrs. Wiley, "Do you manage this place by yourself?"

"Mostly. I have a son and two daughters, all married and living in the area. My husband, Thad, died six years ago."

Beth said she was sorry. That out of the way, she asked, "Why did you sell an acre to the Gordons?"

"What does that have to do with their murders?"

I said, "To be frank, ma'am, I find it odd that the Gordons spent so much money for land that couldn't be developed."

"I think I told you, Detective, they wanted a view of the Sound."

"Yes, ma'am. Did they mention any other use they might want to make of the land? For instance, fishing, boating, camping?"

"You can't launch any boat from there, except maybe a canoe. The land is on a high bluff."

"But you could land a boat on the beach?"

"Maybe at high tide, but there are treacherous rocks. You could probably anchor and swim or walk to the beach at low tide."

I nodded. "Did they approach you about selling your land?"

"Yes. I told them I wasn't interested. I don't like to sell land—it should be passed on to the family. But this was only an acre, and the Gordons seemed to have been heart-set on this bluff."

I said pointedly, "The view must be breathtaking for twenty-five big ones."

"It is."

"Did the Gordons ever ask you if they could *lease* the bluff?"

She thought a moment, then said, "No, now that you mention it. I might have preferred that."

"How much would you have asked by the year?"

"Oh, I suppose a thousand would be fair."

I said, "Would you be good enough to show us this land?"

Mrs. Wiley looked at her watch. "All right. I'll be right back."

She stood and went inside through the rear screen door.

I said to Beth, "The Gordons had to *own* the property. Why?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

Mrs. Wiley came out of the back door, carrying her pocketbook and car keys. She walked toward her car, a basic gray Dodge.

Beth and I got into the PD and followed Mrs. Wiley. We made a right on Middle Road, a four-lane road that ran east–west and passed through the heart of the farmland and vineyards, with sweeping vistas in all directions. On my left, about a mile away to the north, I could see where the flat tillable land suddenly rose up, like a wall, covered with trees and bush. This was, in fact, the bluff whose north slope fell into the sea.

We were silent awhile; then Beth said, "They needed to *own* the land. Why? Right-of-way? Oil, gas, coal, diamonds, rubies?"

"There are no minerals on Long Island, no precious metals, no gems. Just sand, clay, and rock. Even I know that."

Mrs. Wiley swung off the highway onto a dirt farm road. We headed north, toward the bluffs, bumping along at about thirty miles an hour, dust flying up all over the place. I rolled up my window and told Beth to do the same.

She did and said, apropos of nothing, "We're approaching toidy-toid and toid."

"I do *not* speak with that accent. I do *not* find that amusing."

"I hear ya."

Mrs. Wiley swung off onto a smaller rutted track that ran parallel to the bluff. She stopped in the middle of the track, and Beth pulled up behind her. Mrs. Wiley got out, and we followed suit. We were covered with dust and so was the car, inside and out.

Mrs. Wiley was standing at the base of the bluff. She said, "Hasn't rained in two weeks. The grape growers like it that way this time of year. They say it makes the grapes sweeter, less watery. The potatoes don't need the rain now either. But the vegetables and fruit trees could use a good soaking."

I was brushing dust off my T-shirt and my eyebrows, and I really, *really* didn't care. I said, "I guess some folks are praying for rain and some are praying for sun. That's life."

She looked at me and said, "You're not from around here."

"No, ma'am. But my uncle has a place here. Harry Bonner."

"Oh, yes. His wife, June, passed away about the same time as my Thad. Your aunt was a fine woman, a good amateur archaeologist and historian."

"Right. Peconic Historical Society. Are you a member?"

"Yes. That's how I met June. Your uncle was not interested, but he did finance a few digs. You ought to see our museum. We're only open weekends after Labor Day. But I have a key."

"I'll give you a call." I looked up at the bluff rising out of the flat earth. I asked Mrs. W., "Is this the Gordons' land?"

"Yes. The land starts here, rises to the top of the bluff, then down the other side, and ends at the high-water mark." She then said, "Well, you don't need me to show you up to the top. Be careful on the sea side. It drops steeply, and there aren't many footholds."

Margaret Wiley went back to her car and drove off in a cloud of dust. I brushed the dust off my clothes again. We looked up at the bluff. I said, "Let's see that twenty-five-G view."

It was only about fifty feet to the top, the equivalent of a five-story walk-up, which I used to be able to do with enough energy left to kick down a door, wrestle a perp to the floor, slap the cuffs

on, and drag him down to the street and into a PD. But now I felt shaky, and I had to stop and kneel down.

Beth asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. . . . Just a minute." I took a bunch of breaths and then continued on.

We reached the top of the bluff and looked out over Long Island Sound. Truly it was an incredible panorama. The Sound was calm, and we saw a few sailboats and powerboats. About ten miles away we could make out the Connecticut coast.

Behind us were the flat farmlands, and from up here we could see the quiltwork of potatoes, grapevines, and orchards. Quaint clapboard houses dotted the green fields. I said, "What a view."

"Magnificent," Beth agreed. "Worth twenty-five thousand?"

"That is the question." I looked at her. "What do you think?"

"In theory, no. But up here, yes."

"Well put."

We stayed silent for a while, then Beth walked to the only substantial tree on the crest, a ten-foot-tall gnarled oak. She bent down, then straightened up, holding a coil of green nylon rope. "Look."

I joined her and looked at her find. The rope was knotted every three feet or so for handholds. One end was tied to the base of the tree. Beth said, "There's probably enough to reach the beach."

We looked down the slope, and we could see where the grass was worn from the climbs up and down the face of the bluff. I noticed that where the grass had eroded, there were those reddish streaks of clay and iron in the soil. About ten feet below, a sort of shelf or ledge appeared. Beth said, "I'm going to have a look."

She took the rope in both hands and walked backward down to the ledge, playing out the rope as she descended. She called up, "Come on down. This is interesting."

"Okay." I walked down the slope, holding the rope in one hand. I stood on the ledge beside Beth. In the center of the ledge was a cave, but you could tell it was not natural. In fact, I could see shovel marks. Beth and I crouched down and peered into the opening. It was small, about three feet in diameter and only about four feet

deep. There was nothing inside. I couldn't imagine what this was for, but I speculated, "You could stash a picnic lunch and a cooler of wine in there. This is nice, romantic."

"It could be. But it's not now. I'm getting cold." Beth stood, grabbed the rope, and walked up to the crest. I waited until she got to the top, then followed.

Beth coiled the rope at the base of the tree. She turned, and we found ourselves face to face, about a foot apart. It was one of those awkward moments. I put my hand out and brushed her hair, then her cheek. I moved in for the big smooch, but she stepped back and uttered the magic word that all modern American men have been Pavloved to respond to. "No."

We didn't say anything else, but walked down the bluff and got into the black PD. She started the car, and leaned over and kissed me perfunctorily on the cheek, and off we went, raising dust.

A mile later we were on Middle Road. She had a good sense of direction and headed back to Nassau Point without my help.

We wound up at the house where the Gordons had lived, and Beth pulled up behind my Jeep. It was getting dark. She said, "I'm going home tonight. There's no reason to be here twenty-four hours a day any longer."

"Stop at my place first. I have to give you the printouts."

"They'll wait until tomorrow." She said, "I need to go to the office in the morning. Why don't we meet tomorrow about five o'clock?"

"My place."

"All right." She smiled. "Get some rest."

"You, too." I got out of her car. She made a U-turn, waved, and drove off.

BACK at Uncle Harry's, I checked the answering machine in the den and saw I had a lot of messages. Assuming that these messages would not be particularly pleasant or rewarding, I poured a big, fat brandy from Uncle's crystal decanter into Uncle's crystal glass and sat in Uncle's recliner and sipped until I had a little buzz on.

Finally I hit the message button. The first message came at seven

a.m. and was from Uncle Harry, who'd seen me on TV the night before. There were three similar messages: one from my parents in Florida, who had heard I was on TV, and then a call each from my siblings, Jim and Lynne, who are good about staying in touch. Then there was my partner, Dom Fanelli, who said, "Hey, you hump, I saw your mug on the morning news. What the hell are you doing out there? You got two Pedros looking for you, and you show up on TV, and now everyone knows you're out east. I'm trying to find these guys before they find you again. Anyway, more good news—the boss is wondering what the hell you're doing at a crime scene. *Ciao.*"

The next call was from Max. "John, for the record, you're no longer employed by the Southold Township PD. Thanks for your help. I'd like to buy you a drink. Call me."

The final message came on. Beth's voice said, "Hi. I'm calling from the car. I just wanted to say thanks for your help today. I don't know if I said that. Anyway, I enjoyed meeting you, and if somehow we don't get together tomorrow—I may not get out that way, lots of office stuff and reports—well, I'll call either way. Thanks again."

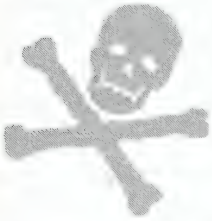
The call had come not ten minutes after I'd left her, and her voice sounded distinctly formal and distant. In fact, it was a brush-off.

What else could go wrong? I'm probably infected with bubonic plague; I'm probably in trouble back on the job; Pedro and Juan know where I am; Max, my bud, fires me; and then my true love takes a powder. Plus, Tom and Judy, who liked me, are dead. And it was only nine p.m.

The idea of a month in the Caribbean suddenly popped into my head. Or I could stay here and tough it. Revenge, vindication, and glory—that's what John Corey was about. Furthermore, I had something no one else had: a half-baked idea of what this was about.

For the first time all day I was able to think without interruption. As I stared out the dark window, those little pings in my head were making white dots on the black screen, and the image was starting to take shape. I needed a few more points of light, a half-dozen little pings, and then I would have the answer to why Tom and Judy Gordon were murdered.

Chapter Five



MORNING sunlight streamed into my bedroom windows. I arose, showered, shaved, and so forth, and made a cup of coffee.

I had spent the night thinking, or, as we say in the biz, engaged in deductive reasoning. I had also made callbacks to everyone except Max and Beth. I told everyone that the person on TV was not me and that I had spent the night watching *Monday Night Football* in the Olde Towne Taverne. Everyone bought it. I hoped my commanding officer, Detective Lieutenant Wolfe, would also buy it. Anyway, I had spent the rest of the night going through the Gordons' financial records again.

I had looked closely at May and June of the previous year to see how the Gordons had financed their one-week vacation in England after their business trip. The Visa card in June *was* slightly higher than usual, and so was their Amex. But whatever they were up to, they hid it well.

I was dressed more spiffily this morning, in tan cotton pants and striped oxford shirt. A blue blazer hung on the back of the kitchen chair. My .38 was on my ankle, and my shield—for what it was worth out here—was inside my jacket.

I walked down the sloping lawn to my uncle's dock. I recalled the time the Gordons tied up to the dock—this would have been mid-June, a week or so after I'd met them for the first time, which had been in the bar of Claudio's Restaurant in Greenport. They talked me into taking a spin with them. We tooled around the series of bays that lie between the North and South Forks of Long Island. This was the time when we got caught in the wind and currents in Plum Gut, and I thought I was going to puke.

I don't think I'm a particularly likable fellow, but the Gordons

went out of their way to befriend me, and I never understood why. They may have known they were in danger or could be in danger. They'd already made the acquaintance of Chief Maxwell. I think this may have been a way of showing someone that Tom and Judy hung out with the fuzz. And then something went wrong, and those bright brains got splattered across the cedar deck.

I turned and walked back toward the house, eager to do battle. I had yet another seemingly unconnected dot that needed to be placed on the sonar screen: Mr. Fredric Tobin, vintner.

I drove up to Main Road and turned east into the rising sun. Main Road is mostly rural, but it boasts about two dozen wineries. Regardless of where the vineyards are, most of the wineries have set up headquarters on Main Road to rope in the touristos with wine tours and tastings.

The wines themselves aren't bad, I'm told. Some have won competitions, I'm told. As for *moi,* I'll have a Bud.

In the hamlet called Peconic, I pulled into a big gravel parking field marked by a wooden sign that read FREDRIC TOBIN VINEYARDS. The sign was black lacquer, and the letters were carved into the wood and painted gold.

I exited my expensive sport utility vehicle and noticed a dozen others like my own. This was where they bred perhaps. I walked toward the Tobin complex. The smell of crushed and fermenting grapes was overwhelming, and a million bees flew around.

How shall I describe the Tobin winery? Well, if a French château were built of white-stained cedar shingle, it would look like this place. Clearly, Mr. Tobin had spent a small fortune.

The complex consisted of the visitors reception area, to the left of which was the big gift and wine shop. To the right was the actual winemaking wing, a sprawling two-story building filled with copper vats, crushers, and all that stuff. Rising above all of this was a broad central tower, sort of like a castle keep, about fifty feet high, from which flew a big black flag with the Tobin logo. Someone liked to see his name around. Farther to the left was a small prissy restaurant, where people sat and blabbed about the wine. Attached to and be-

hind the restaurant was a big catering hall. I'd been to the hall for one of Mr. Tobin's winetasting soirees in July. I had been a guest of the Gordons', as I may have mentioned. There were about two hundred people, the cream of North Fork society, and according to Tom and Judy, they were the only Plum Island people there. Tom said, "Hosts and hostesses avoid Plum Island people like the plague." We got a good chuckle out of that. Gosh, I missed Tom and Judy.

I recalled that on this occasion Tom introduced me to our host, Fredric Tobin, a single gentleman dressed in a foppish purple suit, a white silk shirt, and a tie that sported vines and grape clusters. Gag me with a spoon. Then Tom had pointed out to me a young lady who was Mr. Tobin's current live-in. She was an absolute knockout—about twenty-five, tall, blond, blue eyes, and built like she came out of a Jell-O mold. Oh, Freddie, you lucky dog.

I found it a little out of character for Tom and Judy to be involved with a guy like Fredric. Regarding that name, there's a case of getting rid of an *e* while everyone else around here was trying to tack *e*'s onto things. To be succinct, Fredric the Grape seemed like a pompous jackass, and I liked the idea of popping his balloons a little. Also, he had a beard and perhaps a white sports car.

I was now in the gift shop. I asked the cashier, "Is Mr. Tobin in?"

The young lady glanced at me and replied, "I'm not sure."

I took my shield case out of my jacket and held it up to her. "Police department, miss. What I'd like you to do is phone Mr. Tobin's office and have him come here chop-chop. Okay?"

She nodded and did as she was told. Then she hung up and said to me, "He'll be right down."

"Where's up?"

She pointed to a door in the far wall and said, "That leads to the tower suites—the business offices."

"Right. Thanks." I went through the door and found myself in a large round wood-paneled lobby that was the base of the tower. There was a staircase and, to the right of that, an elevator.

The elevator door opened, and Mr. Tobin strode out. I noted that the expression on his face was one of concern. I said, "Mr. Tobin?"

He turned toward me. "Yes?"

"Detective Courtney." I sometimes mispronounce my name.

"Oh . . . Yes, what is this about?"

"I'm a homicide detective."

"Oh . . . The Gordons."

"Yes, sir. Just a few routine questions." He apparently didn't remember me. Regarding my status, I simply had not heard Max's message on my machine. I said to the proprietor, "I understand you were a friend of the victims'."

"Well, it's a small island. Eventually everyone's paths cross."

"I see."

Regarding Fredric Tobin, he was dressed, I'm chagrined to say, somewhat like I was dressed: a bunch of designer labels and Top-Siders. He was a man of about fifty, perhaps younger, less than medium height, which might account for his Napoleon complex. He was of medium build, had a full head of short brown hair, though not all his own, and a neatly trimmed beard. His teeth, also not his own, were pearly white, and his skin was suntanned. All in all, he was a well-groomed fellow, well spoken, and he carried himself well. However, all the cosmetics and grooming couldn't change his beady dark eyes, which moved all over the place, like they were loose in their sockets.

He wore a pine-scented aftershave lotion, which, I suspected, did not attract bees.

He said, "I'm sorry, I don't— I mean, I have absolutely no knowledge of what could have happened to the Gordons."

"Well, they were murdered."

"I know. I meant—"

"I just need some background."

"Perhaps I should call my attorney."

My eyebrows rose at that. I said, "That's your right." I added, "We can do this down at the station house with your attorney present. Or we can do this here in about ten minutes."

He seemed to mull this over. "I don't know."

I spoke in my most engaging tone. "Look, Mr. Tobin, I'm just

interviewing friends of the Gordons'. You know—background."

"I see. Well, if you think I can help, I'll be happy to answer any questions you have."

"There you go." I wanted to get this guy away from a phone, so I said, "Hey, I've never walked through a vineyard. Can we do that?"

"Of course. Actually, I was about to do that when you arrived."

I followed him out a glass-paneled door into the sunlight. Two small dump trucks were parked nearby, filled with grapes.

Mr. Tobin informed me, "We began harvesting two days ago—Monday."

"That's a big day for you. You were here all day, I guess."

"I was here early."

We walked into the closest vineyard, between two rows of unpicked white grapes. It really smelled good out here.

"Excuse me, Detective . . . What was—"

"Just call me John."

We walked awhile in silence through the vineyards. Sometimes if you don't ask questions, the person you're interviewing gets fidgety and starts to babble to fill in the silence. After a minute or so Mr. Tobin said, "They seemed like such nice people."

I nodded.

He let a few seconds pass, then added, "They couldn't have had an enemy in the world. But there are some strange goings-on at Plum Island. Actually, what happened sounds like a burglary. That's what I heard. But the media are trying to connect it to Plum Island."

"How well did you know the Gordons?"

"We were social acquaintances. They were enamored with the glamour and romance of winemaking." He pulled a bunch of white grapes from the vine and squeezed one in his mouth. "Very nice. This is going to be a vintage year."

"Terrific. When was the last time you saw the Gordons?"

"About a week ago. Here, try this." He handed me half the bunch. We walked along like old buds, squeezing grape pulp into our mouths.

I found myself almost liking the guy, my first impression notwith-

standing. Tobin was a man of some charm. You could tell he loved what he did; he seemed very much at home among the vines.

We turned into another row, and Mr. Tobin said to me, "One of my employees told me that she heard on the radio that the Gordons had possibly stolen a new vaccine and were going to sell it. Apparently, they were double-crossed and murdered. Is that right?"

"That seems to be what happened."

"There's no danger of a . . . plague or some kind of epidemic—"

"None at all."

"Good. There were a lot of worried people the other night."

"Worry no more. Where were you Monday night?"

"Me? Oh, I was at dinner with friends. In my restaurant."

"What time?"

"About eight. We hadn't even heard the news yet."

"Where were you earlier? Like about five, five thirty."

"I was home."

"Alone?"

"I have a housekeeper and a girlfriend."

"That's nice. Will they recall where you were at five thirty?"

"Of course. I was home." He looked at me and said, "This sounds like an interrogation."

It should. It was. But I didn't want Mr. Tobin calling his lawyer. I said to him, "These are just standard questions, Mr. Tobin. I'm trying to get a picture of where everyone was Monday night. When we have a suspect, then some of the friends and co-workers of the Gordons' may become witnesses. You see?"

"I see."

I let him settle down awhile, and we did grape talk again. The guy was smooth, but like anyone else, he was a little jumpy around the fuzz. I asked him, "Where did you see the Gordons last week?"

"Let me think. Dinner at my house. I had a few people over."

"What was your attraction to the Gordons?"

He replied, "I think I indicated it was the other way around."

"Then why would you invite them to your house?"

"Well, in truth, they told some fascinating tales about Plum

Island. My guests always enjoyed that." He added, "The Gordons earned their dinner."

"Did they?" The Gordons rarely spoke about their job to me. I asked Mr. Tobin, "Have you ever been to the Gordons' house?"

"No. I don't even know where they lived."

"Then where did you send the social invitations?"

"Well, my public relations person does that. But now that I think about it, I recall that they live . . . lived in Nassau Point."

"Yes, sir. It was in all the news."

I noticed that Mr. Tobin had little beads of sweat at the base of his hair weave. I had to keep in mind that the most innocent of people just don't like being questioned.

We were in a row of vines with purple grapes now. I said, "Hey, this goes on forever. How many acres do you have here?"

"Here I have two hundred acres. I have another two hundred scattered around."

"Wow. That's big. Do you lease land?"

"Some."

"Do you lease land from Margaret Wiley?"

He didn't reply immediately. The hesitation was interesting.

Finally he said, "I believe we do. Yes, we do. About fifty acres. Why do you ask?"

"I know she leases land to the vintners. She's an old friend of my aunt and uncle. It's a small world. Small fork."

We found ourselves heading back into the big shingled complex. I looked around and said, "I don't see your house."

"I don't actually live here. I do have an apartment on the top of that tower, but my house is south of here."

"On the water?"

"Yes."

"Do you boat?"

"A little."

"Motor or sail?"

"Motor."

I was going to ask him if he owned a white Formula, but some-

times it's a good idea not to ask a question about something you can discover another way. Fredric Tobin was not a murder suspect, but I had the impression he was hiding something.

Mr. Tobin showed me in through the entrance that we'd come out of. He glanced at his watch, clearly tired of my company.

I said to him, "Just a few more routine questions. How long did you know the Gordons?"

"Oh, about a year and a half."

"Did you know they were amateur archaeologists?"

"I . . . Yes, I did."

"Did you know they belonged to the Peconic Historical Society?"

"Yes. In fact, that's how we met." He seemed to mull something over. I can tell when a man is mulling, and I never interrupt a muller. Finally he said, "As a matter of fact, the Peconic Historical Society is having a party Saturday night. I am hosting it on my back lawn. Why don't you and a guest join us?"

I replied, "Thanks. I'll try." Actually, I wouldn't miss it.

"Chief Maxwell may be there. He has all the particulars."

"Great," I said. "You've been very helpful, Mr. Tobin. I really appreciate your time, and I appreciate your not making a big deal of this with an attorney."

He said, "If I can be of any further help, please let me know."

"Okay. Will you walk me out to my car?"

"If you'd like."

On the way through the gift shop, I stopped at a counter on which were some brochures on and about Tobin Vineyards. I gathered a bunch of them. I said, "I'm one of those brochure nuts. I have all these brochures from Plum Island. I'm getting a real education on this case."

He didn't reply.

We walked out into the sunlight. I said, "By the way, I was, like yourself, an acquaintance of the Gordons'."

He stopped walking, and I, too, stopped. He looked at me.

I said, "John Corey."

"Oh, yes. You're the policeman who was wounded."

"That's right. I'm feeling much better now."

"Aren't you a New York City detective?"

"Yes, sir. Hired by Chief Maxwell to help out."

"I see."

"You and I have actually met once. Back in July. You had a big winetasting thing in your big room there."

"Oh, yes." He looked at me. "Yes, I think we did meet."

"No doubt about it." I looked around the gravel lot and commented, "Everyone has a four-wheel drive these days. That's mine over there." I asked, "Is that your white Porsche over there?"

"Yes, it is. How do you know that?"

"I thought you might be a Porsche kind of guy." I put my hand out, and we shook. I said, "I might see you at your party."

"I hope you find who did it."

"Oh, I'm sure I will. I always do. *Ciao.*"

I quickly slipped inside my car and drove off.

I thought about Mr. Fredric Tobin. My training told me he was clean, and of all the theories I'd developed about why the Gordons were murdered and who may have done it, Mr. T. did not fit one of them. Yet my instinct told me to follow up on the gentleman.

I HEADED west along Main Road, into the hamlet of Cutchogue, looking for the Peconic Historical Society building. To the south side of the road was the Cutchogue Village Green, which boasted the oldest house in New York State, circa 1649, according to the sign. This looked promising, and I drove down a small lane that bisected the green. There were a number of old clapboards and shingled buildings. Finally, a short distance from the green, I saw a big white clapboard house, a mansion really, with tall white pillars in front. A wooden Chippendale-style sign on the lawn said PECONIC HISTORICAL SOCIETY. Beneath that it said MUSEUM, then GIFT SHOPPE. Two *p*'s and an *e*. I won a Scrabble game with that word once.

I dialed my new friend Margaret Wiley. She answered, and I said, "Good morning, Mrs. Wiley. This is Detective Corey. You mentioned yesterday about seeing the Peconic Historical Society

museum. Do you think it would be possible to go see it today and maybe speak to some of the officers?"

"I don't know. I'll call Emma Whitestone—the president and archivist."

"Great. I really appreciate—"

"Where can I reach you?"

"Tell you what. I'll call you in ten minutes. I'm in my car."

"I'll do what I can."

"I'd really appreciate it. And thanks for your help yesterday."

"Don't mention it."

I drove to the Gordons' street and noticed Max's white Jeep out front of the crime scene. I pulled into the Murphys' driveway, out of sight of the Gordons' house, and went directly to the rear of their house. The TV was going, and I rapped on the screen door.

Edgar Murphy saw me and opened the door. "Back again?"

"Yes, sir. I just need a minute of your time."

He motioned me inside. Mrs. Murphy gave me a lukewarm hello. The TV stayed on. I said to them, "Describe the white sports car you saw next door in June."

They both gave it a go, but their descriptive powers were limited. Finally I took a pen out of my pocket and drew an outline of a Porsche. They both nodded. Mr. Murphy said, "Yup, that's it. Like a turned-over washtub." Mrs. Murphy agreed.

I took the Tobin Vineyards brochure from my pocket and folded it so as to show only a small black-and-white photo of Fredric Tobin, proprietor. I didn't let them see the whole brochure, because they would have told everybody that the police thought Fredric Tobin murdered the Gordons.

The Murphys studied the photo. Mrs. Murphy said, "That's the man I saw in the sports car."

Mr. Murphy agreed. He asked me, "Is that a suspect?"

"No, sir. Okay, sorry to bother you again." I asked, "Did anyone try to question you about this case?"

"Nope."

"Remember, don't talk to anyone except Chief Maxwell, me, and

Detective Penrose. Thanks again." I exited quickly, got back into my Jeep, and drove off.

Apparently, Mr. Fredric Tobin had been at the Gordons' on at least one occasion. Yet he didn't seem to recall his June visit. Maybe it was another brown-bearded man in a white Porsche. Maybe I should find out why Mr. Tobin lied.

I accessed my answering machine. There were two calls. The first was from Max, who said, "John, this is Chief Maxwell. Maybe I didn't make myself clear about your status. You're no longer working for the township. Okay? I got a call from Fredric Tobin's attorneys, and they're not happy people. Understand? I don't know exactly what you and Mr. Tobin discussed, but I think that's the last official conversation you should have with him. Call me."

Interesting. All I'm trying to do is help, and I'm getting hometowned by the local old boys.

The next call was from my ex, whose name is Robin Paine, which fits her, and who also happens to be an attorney. She said, "Hello, John. This is Robin. I want to remind you that our one-year separation ends on October first, at which time we are legally divorced. You'll get a copy of the decree in the mail."

Right.

Over the causeway and onto Main Road, heading back toward the hamlet of Cutchogue, I called Margaret Wiley.

She said, "I reached Emma at her florist shop, and she's on her way to the Peconic Historical Society house."

"That's very nice of her to give up her time."

"I told her it concerned the Gordon murders."

"Thank you." I think she hung up before I did.

Anyway, I drove back to the Peconic Historical Society house and parked beside a van marked WHITESTONE FLORIST.

I went to the front door, and there was a yellow Post-it near the knocker that said, "Mr. Corey, please let yourself in."

So I did.

The house, as I said, was large, circa about 1850s, typical of the home of a rich merchant or sea captain. The foyer was big, and to

the left was a large sitting room; to the right was the dining room. The place was all antiques, of course, mostly junk, if you want my opinion, but probably worth a bunch of buckos. I didn't see or hear anyone in the house, so I wandered about from room to room.

Presently I found the gift shop—GIFT SHOPPE—which had once been a summer kitchen, I think, and I went in. The lights were off, but sunlight came in through the windows.

The gifts ran the gamut from locally published books to local handicrafts, Indian crafts, needlepoint, dried herbs, pressed flowers, candles, watercolors, seed packets, and so on.

I felt that someone was watching me. I turned toward the entrance of the gift shop, and a good-looking woman of about thirty-something was standing there, staring at me. I said, "I'm looking for Emma Whitestone."

"You must be John Corey."

"I must be. Do you know if she's in?"

"I'm Emma Whitestone."

The day was turning around. "Oh," I said. "I expected someone older."

"I expected someone younger."

"Oh."

She walked up to me and extended her hand. She said, "I'm president of the Peconic Historical Society. How can I help you?"

"Well . . . I don't know."

Okay, here's the deal. She was tall—only an inch or so shorter than I am—thin but shapely, shoulder-length brown hair that was washed but not ironed, light makeup, no nail polish, no jewelry, no earrings, no wedding or engagement ring. She had on a knee-length beige cotton summer dress with itty-bitty shoulder straps holding it up. Also, she was barefoot. She had nice gray-green eyes, and her face, aside from being pretty, was at first glance innocent. On second look, there was a quiet sexuality in her features. This was one good-looking woman. Emma Whitestone.

"This has to do with the Gordons?"

"Yes. Did you know them?"

"Yes. We were friendly, but not friends." She added, "You knew them."

"That's right. How do you know?"

"Your name came up a few times."

"Did it? In a nice way, I hope."

"Very nice. Judy had a little crush on you."

"Really?" I wanted to change this subject, so I said, "Do you have, like, a list of members here?"

"Sure. The office is upstairs. Follow me."

I followed her. She had on a lavender scent. As we made our way through the mansion, I said, "Beautiful house."

She glanced back and said, "I'll give you a tour later."

We went up the wide, sweeping stairs. On the second floor she led me into a room that she described as the upstairs parlor. She invited me to sit in a wing chair near the fireplace, which I did. She said, "Can I offer you a cup of herbal tea?"

"I've had several cups already, thank you."

She sat in a wooden rocker opposite me and crossed her long, long legs. She asked, "What exactly do you need, Mr. Corey?"

"John. Please call me John."

"John. Please call me Emma."

"Well, Emma," I began, "I'd first like to ask you a few questions about the Peconic Historical Society. What's it all about?"

"We have about five hundred members. We are dedicated to preserving, recording, and passing on our heritage."

"And discovering more about that heritage through archaeology."

"Yes. And research. We have some interesting archives here."

"Could I see them later?"

"You can see whatever you'd like later." She smiled.

Oh, my heart. I mean, was this for real? I smiled at her. She smiled again,

Back to the job. I asked, "Were the Gordons active members?"

"They were."

"When did they join?"

"About a year and a half ago."

"Okay." I still wasn't sure where I wanted to go with this interview, but I had this mental image in my mind, sort of a map, and on it was Plum Island, Nassau Point, the bluffs above Long Island Sound, Tobin Vineyards, and the Peconic Historical Society. What was the common element of these five points? I thought about whatever it was that had pinged in my head on Plum Island. History. Archaeology. That was it. *What* was it?

I asked Ms. Whitestone, "Do you know anything about the proposed digs on Plum Island?"

"Only that Tom Gordon had promised the historical society a chance to root around on the island."

"You're not into archaeology?"

"Not really. I prefer archive work. I have a degree in archival science. Columbia University."

I said, "Archival science. Fascinating."

"It can be. I worked at Stony Brook for a while, then got a job out here in the Cutchogue Free Library. I was raised here, but it's hard to make a living out here unless you're in some sort of business. I own a florist shop."

"Yes. I saw the van."

"That's right. You're a detective." She asked, "So what are you doing out here?"

"Convalescing."

"Oh, right. Now I remember. You look fine."

So did she. I asked her, "Do you know Fredric Tobin?"

"Who doesn't? He's our largest benefactor."

"Are you a wine connoisseur?"

"No. Are you?"

"Yes. I can tell the difference between a Merlot and a Budweiser. Blindfolded."

She smiled.

I said, "I'll bet a lot of people wish they'd gotten into wine years ago. I mean, as a business."

"I don't know. It's interesting but not that lucrative."

"It is for Fredric Tobin," I pointed out.

"Fredric lives way above his means."

I sat up. "Why do you say that? Do you know him well?"

"Actually, we were involved."

"In what?"

"I mean, we were lovers, Mr. Corey."

This was disappointing to hear. Nevertheless, I stuck to business and asked, "When was this?"

"It began . . . oh, about two years ago, and it lasted for about nine months. We did Bordeaux, the Loire, Paris. It was all right. He's very generous. Fredric and I are still friends."

"You said he lives above his means."

"Yes. He owes the banks and private investors a small fortune. The sad thing is that he's very successful, and he could probably live very well on his profits if it weren't for Foxwoods. You know, the Indian gambling casino in Connecticut."

"He gambles?"

"Does he ever. I went with him once. He lost about five thousand dollars in one weekend. Blackjack and roulette."

Foxwoods. A nice diversion if you weren't compulsive.

So Fredric Tobin, cool and dandy viniculturist, was a gambler. But if you thought about it, was there a bigger gamble than the grape crop every year? Grapes were still experimental here, and so far, so good. But one day Hurricane Annabelle or Zeke was going to blow a billion grapes into the Long Island Sound.

And then there were Tom and Judy, who gambled with pathogenic bugs. Then they gambled with something else and lost.

I said to Ms. Whitestone, "Do you know if the Gordons ever went with Mr. Tobin to Foxwoods?"

"I don't think so. But I wouldn't know. It's been about a year since Fredric and I parted."

"Right. But you're still friends. You still talk."

"I guess we're friends. He doesn't like it when his ex-lovers are angry with him."

"Do you think Mr. Tobin and Mrs. Gordon were involved?"

"I don't know for sure. I don't think so. He wasn't a wife chaser."

She added, "In any case, he'd rather have Tom Gordon as a friend than Judy Gordon as a lover."

"Why is that?"

"I don't know. I never understood Fredric's attachment to Tom."

"I thought it was the other way around."

"That's what most people thought. It was Fredric who sought Tom out."

I nodded. This was fascinating, but was it relevant? So I asked her point-blank, "Do you think Fredric Tobin could have killed the Gordons?"

She looked at me as if I'd lost my mind. "Fredric? He's not capable of violence of any sort."

"How do you know?"

She smiled and replied, "He just wasn't physical. He was in total control of his temper and his emotions. And why would he want to kill Tom and Judy Gordon?"

"I don't know. I don't even know why they *were* killed. Do you?"

She didn't reply for a second, then said, "Maybe drugs."

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, Fredric was concerned about them. They did coke."

"He told you that?"

"Yes."

Interesting. Especially since Fredric never mentioned it to me and since there wasn't a grain of truth in it. I know what a cokehead looks and acts like, and the Gordons weren't cokeheads. So why would Tobin pin that on them? "When did he tell you this?"

"A few months ago. He said they came to him and wanted to know if he wanted to score. They dealt to support their habit."

"You believe that?"

She shrugged. "Could be."

"Okay, back to Mr. Tobin's relationship with the Gordons. You think he was the one who cultivated the relationship."

"It seemed that way. I know in the nine months I was with him, he'd been on the phone with them a lot, and he rarely had a party without inviting them."

I thought about this. Certainly this didn't square with what Mr. Tobin had told me. I asked Ms. Whitestone, "What, then, was Mr. Tobin's attraction to the Gordons?"

"I don't know. But I do know that he made it seem to everyone that it was the other way around. Funny thing is that the Gordons seemed to go along with it. Yet when it was just the four of us, you could see they considered themselves his equals. You understand?"

"Yes. But why were they playacting?"

Again she shrugged. "Who knows?" She looked at me a moment, then said, "It was almost as if the Gordons had something on him. In public he was the big cheese. In private Tom and Judy were pretty familiar with him."

I asked her, "Have you spoken to Fredric since the murder?"

"Yes. Yesterday morning. He called."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing more than anyone else was saying. Standard stuff."

"Has he spoken to you today?"

"No."

"I visited him this morning."

"Did you? Why?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know why you're here, either."

"Right." I didn't want to explain that I was off the job and had to interview people that the county PD would not think to interview.

She asked me, "What did you think of Fredric?"

"A delightful man. I enjoyed his company." Which was true. But I added, "Beady eyes."

"Shifty, too."

"Right." I said to her, "Could I ask you not tell him of our conversation?"

"I won't go into details. But I'll tell him we spoke." She added, "I don't lie. But I can keep things to myself."

"That's all I ask."

We went round and round for the next fifteen minutes or so. I still didn't know what I was doing here, but it was nice being here.

No, I'm not fickle. I was still pining for Beth. I asked Ms. Whitestone, "Can I use your phone?"

"Sure. Right in there."

I went into an adjoining room, the society's office suite, and called my answering machine. There was one message. A male voice said, "Detective Corey, this is Detective Collins of the Suffolk County Police. Detective Penrose asked me to call you. She's in a lengthy conference. She says she can't meet you this afternoon, and she'll call you tonight or tomorrow." End of message.

I went back to the parlor and asked, "Can we finish over lunch?"

"Sure." She stood. "First I'll show you the archives."

She showed me into what had probably been a good-sized bedroom and which was now filled with file cabinets, shelves, and a long oak table. "We have original books and documents going back as far as the mid-1600s." She went on, "Archive work must be a little like detective work. You know—mysteries, things that need to be uncovered. Don't you think so?"

"I do, now that you mention it." I added, "To tell you the truth, when I was a kid, I wanted to be an archaeologist. I found a musket ball once. Somewhere out here. Now that I'm old and infirm, maybe I should take up archive work."

"Oh, you're not that old. And you might enjoy it. I can teach you to read this stuff."

"Isn't it in English?"

"Yes, except the spelling is atrocious and the script is sometimes hard to decipher. You can learn it in a few months. I taught Fredric, and he has no attention span."

"Really." I asked her, "Can you give me a list of members?"

"Sure." We went into the office, and she gave me a paperbound membership directory, then slipped on some sandals.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Sure. Let me call the shop." She did, and I heard her say softly, "I may not be back this afternoon."

No, Ms. Whitestone, you may not be back if I have anything to say about it.

She hung up, and we went downstairs. She said, "We have small receptions and parties here. It's nice at Christmas."

"That reminds me. Are you going to Mr. Tobin's soiree on Saturday?"

"Maybe. Are you?"

"I thought I would. In the line of duty."

She led me to the front door, and we went outside. It was getting warmer. We got into my sport utility vehicle. I pulled out of the parking area and said, "What do you like? You pick."

"How about the General Wayne Inn? It's on Great Hog Neck. I'll direct you."

"Okay." And off we went.

Ms. Whitestone asked, "Are they leveling with us about the vaccine?"

"It looks that way. You have another theory?"

"No, I don't. I just have this feeling that they were killed for some reason we don't yet understand."

Which is exactly what I thought. Bright woman.

It was a pleasant drive, and we soon found ourselves on Great Hog Neck, which is yet another peninsula that juts into the bay.

I said, "You know they bought land from Mrs. Wiley."

"Yes." She hesitated, then said, "It never made sense to me."

"Did Fredric know about the Gordons' buying that land?"

"Yes." She changed the subject to the immediate environs. "There's the original Whitestone house—1685."

"Still in the family?"

"No, but I'm going to buy it back." She added, "Fredric was supposed to help me out, but . . . That's when I realized he wasn't as well off as he appeared."

I didn't comment.

We pulled into a gravel driveway and parked at this big white clapboard building set on a few acres of treed land. I recalled seeing the place once or twice when I was a kid. I said to Ms. Whitestone, "I think I ate here with my family when I was a wee lad."

"Quite possible. It's two hundred years old. How old are you?"

I ignored this and asked, "How's the food?"

"Depends." She added, "It's a nice setting and off the beaten path. No one will see us, and no one will gossip."

"Good thinking."

We got out of the vehicle and walked toward the inn. She took my arm, which surprised me. She asked, "When do you get off duty?"

"Now."

LUNCH was pleasant enough. We didn't discuss the murders or Lord Tobin or anything unpleasant. Ms. Emma Whitestone was really into history, and whereas Paul Stevens had bored me senseless with his computer-generated voice, Emma Whitestone had me bewitched with her sort of breathy, aspirating tones.

She went on about the Reverend Youngs, who led his flock here from Connecticut in 1640, and I wondered aloud if they took the New London ferry, which got me a cool look. She mentioned Captain Kidd and lesser-known pirates who sailed these waters three hundred years ago. She told me a little about the Whitestones, who were actually *Mayflower* Pilgrims, and about people with first names like Chauncey and Ichabod, not to mention Joshua and Isaac, who weren't even Jewish. And so on.

Ping! I'd heard something that caused a delayed reaction in my usually awake brain. *Ping!* I listened for her to say it again, whatever it was, and I tried to recall what it was, but to no avail. This time, however, I knew it was on the tip of my brain.

Well, before we knew it, it was three p.m. and the waiter was getting antsy. I said, "If you have time, we can take a spin in my boat."

"You have a boat?"

Actually, I didn't, so this might not have been a good line. I said, "I'm staying at my uncle's place. A farm bay estate."

"Bay farm estate."

"Right. Let's go."

We left the General Wayne Inn, and twenty minutes later we were at my place. As I pulled up the long driveway of the big Vic-

torian and parked, I said, "By the way, my aunt used to belong to the Peconic Historical Society. June Bonner."

"Sounds familiar."

"She knew Margaret Wiley." I added, "Actually, my aunt was born here, which is why she talked Uncle Harry into this summer place. But she's deceased. My uncle Harry wants me to buy it."

Okay, into the house, tour of the ground floor, check my answering machine in the den—no messages—into the kitchen for two beers, and out onto the back porch and into two wicker chairs.

She said, "I love watching the water. I don't see your boat."

I looked out at the rickety dock. "Oh, it must have sunk."

"Sunk?"

"Oh, I remember. It's in for repairs."

I'd taken off my jacket and Top-Siders. She'd slipped off the sandals, and we both had our bare feet on the rail. I got my binoculars, and we took turns looking out at the bay. A Bud in one hand, she looked through the binoculars at the distant sky. "I can see flights of Canada geese, long skeins of loons, and a ripply line of old-squaws," she said. "They'll all stay around until November, then continue on south. The osprey winds up in South America."

She rested the binoculars in her lap and stared out to sea. She said, "On stormy days, when the wind blows hard out of the northeast, the sky turns silvery gray and the birds act strange. There's an ominous beauty that has to be felt as much as seen."

We stayed silent for a while; then I said, "Would you like to see the rest of the house?"

"Sure."

My first stop on the tour of the second floor was my bedroom, and we didn't get much farther.

Anyway, without going into details, we hit it off pretty well and fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms.

WHEN I awoke, the sunlight was fading from the window, and Emma was sleeping on her side. I had a sense that I should be doing something constructive. But what? I was being effectively sand-

bagged, and unless Max or Beth shared things with me like forensics, autopsies, and such, I had to fall back on gumshoeing. I'd decided to stick this out no matter who didn't like the idea.

I looked at Emma in the fading light. A naturally beautiful woman. And bright.

She opened her eyes and smiled. "I saw you looking at me."

"You're very nice to look at."

"Do you have a girlfriend out here?"

"No. How about you?"

"I'm between engagements." She sat up, stretched, and yawned. "I need a swim." She rolled out of bed and slipped into her dress. "Let's take a swim."

"Okay." I got up and put on my shirt.

We went outside, across the lawn, and down to the bay.

She looked around. "Private here?"

"Pretty much."

She slipped off her dress and threw it on the foot of the dock. I did the same with my shirt. She dived in, and I did the same.

The water was cool at first, and it took my breath away. We swam out into the dark bay. I felt my right shoulder stiffening, and my lung started to wheeze. I had thought I was getting stronger, but this exertion was too much for me. I swam back to the dock and grabbed on to the old wooden ladder.

Emma came up beside me and asked, "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

We lay on our backs and floated.

She said, "Look up there, John. Shooting stars."

I looked in the southern sky and saw them.

"Make a wish," she said.

"Okay. I wish—"

"Don't tell, or it won't come true."

"It already came true, Emma. Me and you." I mean, how's that for romantic? I think I was in love.

She didn't say anything for a few seconds, then said, "That's very nice."

"I meant it."

We continued to float. What a night—a bright, nearly full moon overhead, a gentle shore breeze, the smell of sea and salt, stars twinkling in the deep purple sky, a beautiful woman, our bodies rising and falling with the slow, rhythmic swells. It doesn't get much better than this. All things considered, this was a lot better than my somewhat unpleasant near-death experience.

Which got me thinking about Tom and Judy. I looked up at the sky, and I sent out a promise that I'd find their killer.

I guess it was the feeling of total relaxation or maybe looking up at the constellations, connecting the points of light. Whatever it was, I had it now, the whole picture—the pings, the points, the lines. It all came together in a sort of rush, and my brain was racing so fast I couldn't keep up with my own thoughts. I yelled, "That's it!" and exhaled so much air that I sank.

I came to the surface sputtering, and Emma was there beside me, looking concerned. "Are you all right?"

"I'm terrific!" I grabbed her by the arms, and we treaded water. I said, "What did you tell me about Captain Kidd?"

"I said there's a legend that Captain Kidd buried some of his treasure under one of the trees up by Mattituck Inlet. They're called Captain Kidd's Trees."

"We're talking about Captain Kidd the pirate, right?"

"Yes. William Kidd. His treasure is supposed to be buried around here."

"Where?"

"If I knew, I'd be rich." She smiled. "And I wouldn't tell you."

This was mind-boggling. It all fit. But maybe I was totally wrong. . . . No, it fit. It fit everything.

"Are you all right? You look pale or blue."

"I'm fine. I need a drink."

"Me, too. The wind is getting cold."

We swam back to shore, grabbed our clothes, and ran back across the lawn to the house. I got two thick bathrobes, then retrieved Uncle's decanter of brandy and two glasses. We sat on the

porch, drinking, watching the lights across the bay. A sailboat glided over the water, its white sail ghostly in the moonlight, and thin wispy clouds raced across the starlit sky. What a night. What a night. I said to Tom and Judy, "I'm getting it. I'm getting close."

Emma glanced at me, and I said, "Tell me about Captain Kidd."

"What would you like to know?" she asked.

"Everything."

"Does this have to do with the murders?"

I looked at Emma. Despite our recent intimacy, I barely knew her, and I wasn't sure I could trust her to keep this to herself. I realized, too, I'd been overly excited about Captain Kidd. Trying to be cool now, I asked, "How could Captain Kidd be related to the Gordons' murders?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I'm asking you."

"I'm off-duty now. I'm just curious about pirates."

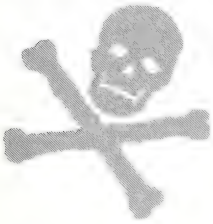
"I'm off-duty, too. No history until tomorrow."

"Okay."

I put some Big Band dance music on my tape player, and we danced on the back porch in our bare feet and bathrobes and drank brandy and watched the bay and the stars.

It was one of those enchanted evenings, as they say, one of those magic nights that are often a prelude to something not so good.

Chapter Six



Ms. Emma Whitestone chose to spend the night. In the morning, at her suggestion, we drove to the Cutchogue Diner, a real 1930s icon. The place was packed with locals. We sat in a small booth and ordered huge breakfasts.

I said, as nonchalantly as possible, "I'd like to go back to the historical society house. How about this afternoon at, say, four?"

She shrugged. "Okay."

I regarded her across the table. Sunlight fell on her face. I liked Emma Whitestone. I liked the way she packed down two fried eggs, four sausages, a heap of home fries, buttered toast, juice, and tea with cream.

She glanced at the clock behind the counter, and I realized she didn't wear a watch. This lady was something of a free spirit and at the same time was president and archivist of the Peconic Historical Society. It was a nice contrast, I thought.

A lot of people smiled at her and said hello, and I could see she was well liked. That's always a good sign. However, I wondered about Emma Whitestone's judgment in men, specifically Fredric Tobin and perhaps me as well.

In any case, we chatted for a while, and a long shot popped into my head. I borrowed a pencil from the waitress and wrote "44106818" on a napkin. I turned the napkin around and said, "If I played these lottery numbers, would I be a winner?"

Emma smiled between bites of toast. "Jackpot," she said. "Where'd you get those numbers?"

"Something I read. What do they mean?"

She looked around and lowered her voice. "Well, when Captain Kidd was in a Boston jail charged with piracy, he smuggled a note to his wife, Sarah, and on the note were those numbers. Everyone has been trying to figure it out for the last three hundred years."

"What do you think they mean? Could those numbers be map coordinates? Minutes and seconds?"

"That's the obvious thing, but those coordinates are actually somewhere around Deer Isle in Maine. There are dozens of books, plays, and ballads surrounding Captain William Kidd's buried treasure. Ninety-nine percent of them are just myth."

"Okay, but aren't those numbers evidence of *something?*"

"Yes, they mean *something.* The prevailing theory is that they represent paces, which is the traditional method of pirates. Forty-four paces in the direction of ten degrees and sixty-eight paces in the direction of eighteen degrees. Who knows?"

"Do you think the treasure is buried under one of those trees? Captain Kidd's Trees?"

"I don't know." She added, "The trees are all gone now. People used to dig around the stumps. Either the treasure has been found and the person who found it didn't advertise it to the world, or there was never any treasure, or it's still buried and will stay buried forever."

"What do you think?"

"I think I should go open my shop."

I paid the bill, and we left. The diner was five minutes from the Peconic Historical Society, where Emma had left her van. I pulled into the lot, and she gave me a quick peck on the cheek, like we were more than just lovers.

She said, "See you at four." She got out, hopped into her van, honked, waved, and pulled away.

I drove around, and I put more of the mental puzzle together. I finally had what the physicists would call a unified theory—the Plum Island so-called archaeological digs, the high-priced powerboat, the expensive rental house on the water, the *Spirochete* anchored off Plum Island, the membership in the Peconic Historical Society, and the one acre of apparently useless land on the Sound, and maybe the trip to England. Add to this the Gordons' whimsical flying of the Jolly Roger, the missing ice chest, and the eight-digit number on their sea chart, and you had a pretty solid unified theory that tied all these things together.

Anyway, there were still things I didn't know and things I didn't understand. One thing I didn't know was who murdered Tom and Judy Gordon. The treasure was obviously worth enough to commit double murder. So I had what I thought was the motive, but not the murderer.

I CALLED my answering machine and retrieved two messages. The first was from the NYPD Absence Control Unit telling me my physical was next Tuesday and asking me to acknowledge the message. Whenever the bosses can't get ahold of you, they ask personnel or

the payroll section or the health services division to call you about something that you have to reply to. I hate sneakiness.

The next message was from my former partner, Beth Penrose. She said, "Hi, John. Sorry I didn't get back to you sooner, but it's been crazy here. Anyway, I know you're not officially involved with the case, but I have a few things I'd like to discuss with you. Why don't I come out tomorrow afternoon? Call me or I'll call you, and we'll come up with a time and place. Take care."

So now she wanted to discuss things with me, which meant she wanted to know what, if anything, I'd discovered. To Beth Penrose I had become just another witness. Well, maybe I was being cynical. Though maybe I had to move Beth Penrose out of my mind in order to fit Emma Whitestone in.

Anyway, off I went to the Cutchogue Free Library. It was at the edge of the village green—a big clapboard building with a steeple that looked as if it had once been a church.

I parked and went inside. Within ten minutes I was sitting in a reading alcove with a reference book in front of me titled *The Book of Buried Treasure.*

According to the treasure-trove laws of England, all hidden or lost property belonged to the crown. However, in the United States there was something called the Act for the Preservation of American Antiquities, and it was pretty clear that anything found on federal land belonged to Uncle Sam. But if you found any sort of treasure on your own land, it was pretty much yours, as long as you could prove that the original owner was dead and/or the heirs were unknown. The example given was pirate treasure, plunder, bounty, and all that good stuff.

And to make a nice situation even nicer, the IRS, in some unbelievable lapse of greed, required that you pay tax only on the portion you sold or otherwise turned into cash each year, as long as you weren't a *professional* treasure hunter. What a sweet deal.

I read for a while longer, learning about the treasure-trove laws and reading some interesting examples and case histories. I also found there is a place called the Admiralty Section of the Public

Records Office in London, and who knew what you could find there if you had time, patience, a magnifying glass, and a little greed. I was sure that now I understood the Gordons' lost week in London last year.

I had to assume the Gordons had read what I was reading now and knew the treasure-trove laws. Beyond that, common sense would tell them that anything they found on Plum Island belonged to the government and that anything they found on their rented property belonged to the owner. Tom and Judy realized that their best course of action—the most profitable in the long run—was simply to change the location of the discovery, announce the find, bask in the publicity, and go down in history as the handsome young Ph.D.'s who found Captain Kidd's lost treasure and became filthy rich.

But first they had to get anything they found on Plum Island off Plum Island. Then they had to rebury the treasure in such a way that its rediscovery would withstand scientific scrutiny. The answer to that was the eroded bluffs. It all made sense. But somewhere along the line Tom and Judy did or said something that got them killed.

Fredric Tobin had lied to me about a few facts and about his relationship with the Gordons. Plus, Tobin was either broke or on his way. To a homicide detective this was like an alarm bell. He'd also seduced Emma Whitestone, historian and archivist. It all seemed to fit. It was probably Tobin who'd somehow tumbled onto the possibility that there was buried treasure on Plum Island. And it was probably Tobin who paid for the Gordons' week in England to try to pinpoint the location.

Fredric Tobin was my prime suspect, but I wasn't discounting Paul Stevens or anyone else on Plum Island. For all I knew, this was a larger conspiracy than I first thought.

WHEN I drove into the small parking lot of the historical society mansion, there was no florist van there, but there was a ten-year-old Ford. I went to the front door, and there was another Post-it note that said simply, "Enter."

So I did. Inside the big foyer I called out, "Emma!" No answer. I climbed the stairs and went into the upstairs parlor.

From behind the half-open door there was a scream. I turned quickly, and Emma lunged at me with a sword and stuck it in my gut. She yelled, "Take that, you blackhearted pirate."

My heart raced and my bladder almost let loose.

"Scared you, didn't I?" In her hand was a soft plastic cutlass.

I smiled. "Kind of surprised me."

"You looked more than surprised."

I got myself settled down and noticed she was wearing tan slacks today, a blue blouse, and sandals.

She said, "I got this sword in the gift shop. There's a whole section of kids' junk." She showed me a yellowed map that said PYRATE MAPPE. "This is one of our biggest sellers for children of all ages." She added, "People are fascinated by pirate treasure."

"Was Fredric interested in it?"

"Maybe."

"Didn't you tell me you taught him to read old English script?"

"Yes, but I don't know specifically what he was interested in reading." We looked at each other awhile; then she asked me, "What's going on, John?"

"I'm not sure."

"Why did you want to meet me here?"

"Well . . . can I rely on you to keep this to yourself?"

"Keep what to myself?"

"Pirates."

IN THE archive room, we both sat at the oak table. Emma had gathered some material—original documents encased in plastic, some old books, and some reproductions of historical letters and documents. She asked me, "What exactly are you interested in?"

"Pirate treasure. Is there any around here?"

"Sure. Almost anywhere you dig, you'll find silver and gold coins, diamonds and pearls. The farmers say it makes plowing difficult."

"I can imagine. But seriously." I hate smart alecks.

She said, "There are a number of pirate legends and truths associated with this area. Would you like to hear the most famous? The story of Captain Kidd?"

"Yes, I would. I mean, as he relates to buried treasure."

"Okay. First of all, Captain William Kidd was not really a pirate. He was, in fact, a privateer hired by Lord Bellomont, who was then governor of Massachusetts, New York, and New Hampshire. With a royal commission Captain William Kidd set sail in 1696 from New York harbor to search for pirates and seize their plunder. Besides Bellomont, there were also rich and powerful backers of this enterprise in England, including four English lords and King William himself."

I listened as she related this tale by heart. I wondered if Tobin knew this story, and if so, did he know it before or after he met Emma Whitestone?

Emma went on. "So Kidd sailed to the Indian Ocean, where he plundered two ships owned by the Great Mogul of India. On board were fabulous riches, worth in those days about two hundred thousand pounds. Today that could be twenty million dollars. Unfortunately, the Mogul was allied with King William, and he complained to the British government. Kidd defended his actions by saying the Mogul's ships were sailing under French passes, and England and France were at war at the time, so they were technically enemy ships. Unfortunately for Kidd, the British government had a good relationship with the Mogul through the British East India Company. So Kidd was in trouble, and the only thing that was going to get him out of trouble was the loot."

"Money talks."

"Always has." Emma continued, "So Kidd sailed back to the New World. He stopped in the Caribbean, where he learned he was a wanted man, charged with piracy. He left about a third of his booty there. Many of his crew wanted no part of this problem, so they took their share and stayed in the Caribbean. Kidd then bought a smaller ship, a sloop called the *San Antonio,* and sailed to New York to answer the charges. He still had a fantastic amount of treasure on

board, worth today perhaps ten or fifteen million dollars." She looked at me. "This is about the Gordon murders, isn't it?"

Our eyes met. I said, "Please continue."

She stayed silent a moment, then went on. "All right. We know that Kidd then sailed into Long Island Sound and landed at Oyster Bay, where he made contact with a James Emmot, a lawyer famous for defending pirates. At some point Kidd's wife and children joined him on the *San Antonio.* We know that at this time the treasure was still on board. Mr. Emmot went to Boston and delivered a letter that Kidd had written to Bellomont, and also gave Bellomont the Mogul's French passes, proving that the Mogul was double-dealing and therefore the ships were fair game."

"You're saying that Kidd's lawyer turned over these passes, this important defense evidence, to Bellomont?"

"Yes, and Bellomont, for political reasons, wanted Kidd hanged. Emmot got the impression from Lord Bellomont that Kidd would be treated fairly if he turned himself in at Boston. So Kidd does, but he's not stupid. He intended to use the treasure to bargain for his life, so he hides the loot. In 1699 there were thousands of places he could land and safely bury treasure."

"Like Captain Kidd's Trees."

"Yes. And further east there are Captain Kidd's Ledges, which are probably a section of the bluffs, since there are no actual ledges or cliffs on Long Island."

I sat up. "Where?"

"Someplace between Mattituck Inlet and Orient Point. No one really knows for certain. It's just part of the whole myth."

I nodded. One of those myths—Captain Kidd's Ledges—was what prompted the Gordons to buy Mrs. Wiley's acre on the bluffs.

Emma added, "There's no doubt that Kidd dumped treasure in several spots, either here on the North Fork, or on Block Island or Fishers Island. Kidd, of course, never returned. He landed in Boston on July first. Then he was arrested on Bellomont's orders and put into chains. His ship was searched, turning up bags of gold, silver, and some jewelry and diamonds. It was a lot of treasure, but

not as much as Kidd was supposed to have. But the King and the others may have felt that to protect the British East India Company, they had to return the plunder to the Mogul, so they had no interest in pardoning Kidd in exchange for the location of the loot. They would rather *hang* Kidd, which they did. The passes were never produced at Kidd's trial in London, and without them Kidd was convicted and executed."

"Did Kidd say anything about the hidden treasure at his trial?"

"Nothing. There are transcripts of the trial, and you can see that Kidd realized he was going to be hanged no matter what he did or said. I think he accepted this and decided as a last act of spite to take any secrets he had to the grave with him."

"Or he told his wife."

"That's a strong possibility. But I don't think Kidd would have told her where *all* of it was, because if she were arrested and made to talk, then any slim chance that Kidd had of trading buried treasure for his life would have been lost." She added, "Bellomont did look for evidence of hidden treasure, but he died before Kidd was hanged in London, so if Bellomont had any of Kidd's treasure maps, they may have disappeared on Bellomont's death. All treasure hunting starts with the discovery of a long-lost map. It was the common method to go ashore with a few men, bury the treasure secretly, then make a map of the location."

"Then you have witnesses to where the treasure is buried."

She replied, "The traditional pirate method of insuring secrecy is to kill the person who dug the hole and throw him in. In fact, skeletons have been found buried with treasure chests."

I mulled this over, thinking that it may have been one of these maps—a real one—that had somehow come into the possession of Tom and Judy, and/or Fredric Tobin.

After a bit Emma said to me, "Archivists are sort of like detectives, too. Can I make a guess?"

"Sure."

She thought a moment, then said, "Okay, the Gordons got onto some information about Captain Kidd's treasure, and then someone

else found out about it, and that's why the Gordons were murdered." She looked at me. "Am I right?"

I said, "Something like that. I'm working on the details."

"Did the Gordons actually retrieve the treasure?"

"I'm not sure."

She didn't press me. She reflected a moment. "The Gordons did a lot of archaeological digging on Plum Island. . . . Maybe they were really looking for treasure."

"No maybes about it."

"From what I hear, they had holes dug all over the island. That doesn't sound like they knew what or where—"

"The archaeological digs were a cover. It gave them the ability to walk around remote parts of the island with shovels. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of the archival work was a cover, too."

"Why?"

"They wouldn't be allowed to keep anything they found on Plum Island. It's government land. So they had to create a legend of their own. The legend of how Tom and Judy Gordon saw something in the archives, and, they would later claim, this got them to thinking about hunting for the treasure." I added, "In reality, they already knew the treasure was on Plum Island."

"Incredible."

"We can assume the Gordons began with hard information about the location of a treasure on Plum Island, and everything we see them do after that is simply a ruse in preparation for the transportation and reburial of the treasure from Uncle Sam land to their land."

Emma nodded. "And that's why the Gordons bought that land from Mrs. Wiley. Captain Kidd's Ledges."

"That's right."

"But something went wrong."

"It must have. They're dead."

Neither of us spoke for a while. I now had a lot of answers, and I still had a lot more questions. Some of them might never be answered, since Tom and Judy Gordon, like William Kidd, had taken some secrets to the grave with them.

Emma finally asked me, "Who do you think killed them?"

"Probably their partner or partners. Do you have any suspects?"

She shook her head, but I think she had a suspect in mind.

I decided to go for broke. I said to her, "I understand that some people from the Peconic Historical Society were on Plum Island to do a survey of possible digs."

She nodded.

"Was Fredric Tobin one of those people?"

She actually hesitated, which I guess was out of an old habit of loyalty. Finally she said, "Yes. He was on the island once."

"With the Gordons as guides?"

"Yes." She asked, "Do you think—"

I said to her, "I never speculate out loud about suspects." I added, "It's important that you keep all of this to yourself."

She nodded.

I looked at Emma. She seemed to be what she appeared to be—an honest, intelligent, and pleasantly crazy woman. I liked her. I took her hand, and we played hand squeezies.

I said, "Thank you for your time and knowledge."

"It was fun."

I nodded. My mind went back to William Kidd. I said, "So they hanged him?"

"They did. They kept him in chains in England for more than a year before he was tried. He was allowed no legal counsel, no witnesses, and no evidence. He was hanged at Execution Dock on the Thames. His body was covered with tar and hung in chains as a warning to passing seamen. Crows ate the rotting flesh for months."

I stood. "Let's go get a drink."

I NEEDED a major pasta fix, so I suggested dinner at Claudio's in Greenport, and Emma agreed. It was about seven p.m. when we entered the village, and it was getting dark.

The village itself is not as quaint or ye olde as the hamlets; it was, and still is, a working port and a commercial fishing town, though there has been some gentrification in recent years, boutiques, trendy

restaurants, all that. Claudio's sits on the bay at the end of Main Street, near the wharf, just as it has since the last century.

I parked, and we walked out on the long wharf. It was another nice evening, and I commented on the fair weather.

Emma said, "There's a tropical depression forming in the Caribbean."

"Would Prozac help?"

"A baby hurricane."

"Oh, right." Like a baby lion. Hurricanes were nice to watch in your condo in Manhattan. They weren't nice out on this spit of land less than fifty feet above sea level.

So we strolled, we talked. There's an excitement in the early stages of a relationship, like the first three days. After that you sometimes realize you don't like each other. But with Emma Whitestone, so far, so good. She seemed to enjoy my company, too. She took my arm, and we walked to the end of the wharf and watched the boats.

She said, "You know, the English language has few words more intriguing and romantic than words like pirate, buried treasure, galleon. What else?"

"Swashbuckler. I like that one."

And so, standing on the wharf near a big, old three-master, with the sun setting, we played this silly word game, coming up with words like buccaneers and doubloons and phrases like "Shiver me timbers" and "Ahoy, me hardies." We both laughed, and I said, "I like you."

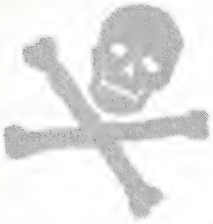
"Of course you do."

We walked back along the wharf toward Claudio's, actually holding hands, which I hadn't done in a long time.

We had a pleasant meal, talking and watching the harbor. She asked me if I'd like her to spend the night again, which I did.

On the drive back to my digs in Mattituck, I had this strange feeling again that none of this was going to end well, not this case, not this thing with Emma, not the thing with Beth, whatever that was, and not my career. It felt to me like the eerie silence and clear skies of an approaching hurricane before it hits.

Chapter Seven



THE next morning, while I was dressing, the doorbell rang, and I assumed that Emma, who was downstairs, would answer it.

I finished dressing: tan slacks, striped oxford shirt, blue blazer, and Top-Siders sans socks—standard outfit of the maritime provinces. In Manhattan, people who didn't wear socks often carried tin cups; here it was *très chic.*

I came downstairs about ten minutes later and found Emma at the kitchen table having coffee with Beth Penrose. *Uh-oh.*

It was one of those moments that called for savoir faire, and I said to Beth, "Good morning, Detective Penrose."

Beth replied, "Good morning."

I said to Emma, "This is my partner, Beth Penrose. I guess you've met."

Emma replied, "I guess so. We're having coffee."

I said to Beth pointedly, "I thought I'd see you later."

Beth replied, "I had a change of plans. I left a message on your machine last night."

"I didn't check it."

Emma stood. "I have to get to work."

"Oh. . . . I'll drive you," I said.

Beth stood also and said to me, "I have to go, too. I just stopped by to pick up those financial printouts."

Emma said to both of us, "Sit. You must have work to do." She moved toward the door. "I'll call Warren—he's my assistant—for a ride. He lives close by. I'll be out on the porch." She didn't make eye contact with me on her way out of the kitchen.

I said to Beth, "She's president of the Peconic Historical Society."

"Really? A bit young for the job."

We both remained standing. I poured myself a cup of coffee.

Beth said, "I thought I would brief you, as a courtesy."

"You don't owe me any courtesies."

"Well, you were very helpful."

"Thank you." I noticed a briefcase beside her chair. I said, "Sit."

"I should go."

"Let's have one cup of coffee together."

"Okay." She poured another cup of coffee and sat opposite me. She was wearing another tailored suit, this one navy blue with a white blouse. She looked fresh and bright eyed.

I couldn't tell what she thought about my houseguest, if in fact she thought anything at all. Aside from a small emotional rush that I'd felt for Beth, I reminded myself that she'd cut me loose professionally. I decided to see what she had that I might need and what she wanted that I might have. I asked her, "So who killed Tom and Judy Gordon?"

She forced a smile. "I thought you'd tell me by now."

"You don't get much for a dollar a week."

She played with her spoon awhile, then looked at me and said, "When I first met you, I didn't like you. You know why?"

"Let me think. . . . Arrogant, smart aleck, too good-looking."

To my surprise she nodded. "That's about it. Now I realize there's more to you."

"No, there isn't."

"Sure there is."

"Maybe I'm trying to get in touch with my inner child."

"Oh, you do that just fine. You should try to get in touch with your suppressed adult side."

"That's no way to speak to a wounded hero."

She continued. "On the whole I think you're loyal to your friends and dedicated to your job."

"Thank you. Let's get to the chase. You want me to brief you about what I've done."

She nodded. "Assuming you've done anything. You appear to have been busy with other things."

I didn't comment.

Beth said, "Do you have those financial printouts for me?"

"Yes." I stood. "In the den. I'll be right back."

Instead of going into the den, I went out the front door.

Emma was sitting in a wicker chair waiting for her ride. Beth's PD, the black Ford, was in the circle.

I said, "I'm sorry I can't drive you to work."

"No problem. Warren's on the way."

"Good. Can I see you later?"

"Friday night I go out with the girls."

"What do the girls do?"

"Same as the boys do." A car pulled into the long driveway, and Emma stood. "Your partner seemed surprised to see me. More than surprised. She was a little . . . put off. Subdued. Unhappy."

I shrugged.

"You said you weren't seeing anyone else out here."

"I'm not. I just met her for the first time Monday."

"You met me Wednesday."

"Right, but—"

"Warren's here. I have to go." She started down the steps, then came back up, kissed me on the cheek, and hurried off to the car.

Oh, well. I went back inside and walked into the den. I hit the PLAY button on my answering machine. The message was at seven p.m. last night, from Beth, who said, "I have a ten a.m. appointment with Max tomorrow. I'd like to stop by on the way—about eight thirty or so. If this is a problem, call me tonight."

Very friendly tone in her voice. She really should have called me from the car phone this morning. But okay. My experience has been that if you miss a message, something interesting usually happens.

BETH Penrose had her papers from the briefcase spread out on the table. I gave her the printouts, which she put to the side.

I indicated the papers on the table. "So what do you have there?"

"Some notes. Reports. Do you want to hear this?"

"Sure." I sat.

Beth said, "Okay. First they've given up on recovering the two bullets from the bay."

"Good decision."

"All right, next. Fingerprints. Almost every print in the house is the Gordons'."

"How about prints on that book of charts?"

"Only the Gordons'." She added, "I examined every page with a magnifying glass and an ultraviolet lamp. Nothing."

"I really thought that might yield something."

"No such luck." She glanced at her notes and said, "The autopsy shows what you'd expect. Massive brain trauma and so forth." She looked up. "The deceased female was about a month pregnant."

Neither of us spoke for a minute or so. Beth shuffled some papers. Then she said, "The red earth found in their running shoes is mostly clay, iron, and sand. There's so much of it around here, it's not even worth trying to match it to a specific site."

I nodded and asked, "Did their hands show any signs that they'd been doing something manual?"

"Actually, yes. Tom had a blister on the heel of his right hand. Soil was embedded in their hands and under their nails. Their clothes, too, showed smudges of the same soil." Beth asked me, "What do you think they were doing?"

"Digging."

"For what?"

"Buried treasure."

She took this as another example of my smart-aleck attitude and ignored me, which I knew she'd do. She continued. "The search of their house didn't turn up too much of interest. They owned expensive clothing, even the casual clothes, a wine cellar with seventeen bottles, four photo albums—you're in a few pictures—a Rolodex, which we're comparing to the one in their office. Nothing unusual in the medicine cabinet. No keys that don't belong, and one that seemed to be missing—the Murphys' key, which Mr. Murphy said he had given to the Gordons. By the way, we found the deed to the Wiley land. All in order." She turned a page and kept

reading. This is the kind of stuff that gets my undivided attention, though so far, there was nothing out of the ordinary.

She said, "I got the D.A. to subpoena the Gordons' phone records. As you'd expect, a lot of calls back home—parents, friends. Lots of calls to Plum Island, service people, restaurants, and on and on. A few calls to the Peconic Historical Society, calls to Margaret Wiley, two to the Maxwell residence, one to Paul Stevens at his Connecticut home, and ten calls to you over the last twelve weeks. Also, about two or three calls a month to Tobin Vineyards in Peconic, as well as Fredric Tobin in Southold and Fredric Tobin in Peconic."

I said, "The gentleman has a house on the water in Southold and keeps an apartment at the winery, which is in Peconic."

She looked at me. "How do you know all that?"

"Because Emma is a close friend of Mr. Tobin. Also, I was invited to a party at His Lordship's waterfront home tomorrow night. I think you should be there."

"Why?"

"It's a good opportunity to chat with some locals. Max will probably be there. You should get the details from him."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Phone calls."

She looked down at her printouts and said, "In May of last year there were four phone calls from London charged to their phone credit card: one each to Indiana and Illinois, one to Plum Island, and a forty-two-minute call to Tobin in Southold."

"Interesting."

"What's with Mr. Fredric Tobin?"

"I'm not sure. Proceed."

"All right. I had the entire contents of the Gordons' office transported to the Suffolk County lab. I also obtained the directory of everyone who works on Plum Island, and we have five detectives assigned to do interviews."

I nodded. This was very good police work. Some of it was relevant; some of it was not.

Beth said, "I reinterviewed Kenneth Gibbs, Paul Stevens's assis-

tant, at his house. He's a bit of a snot, but I don't think he knows any more than he's told us." She added, "Paul Stevens is another story. He's been giving me the slip. I think he knows something, John. As security chief of Plum Island, there's not too much that gets past that guy. If I suspected one person out of all the people we spoke to, it would be Paul Stevens."

"Why?"

"I called him at Plum Island yesterday, and they said he was out. I pressed, and they said he was home sick. I called his home in New London, Connecticut, but no one answered."

I, too, was not satisfied with Mr. Stevens's last performance. He was a possible murder suspect. When the motive is money, the suspects are everybody and anybody. I said, "Give me his address."

She found it in her notes and gave it to me. I tucked it away in a crevice of my brain.

She said, "Regarding Dr. Zollner, we had a pleasant chat on the phone. He's in Washington. Then he's on a traveling schedule. They're keeping him out of my reach."

I said, "You've done a very good job."

"Thanks."

I stood and said, "Let's take a walk."

We went out back and walked down to the water. Beth said, "This is very nice."

"I'm beginning to appreciate it." I picked up a flat stone and skimmed it across the water. It made three skims before it sank.

Beth found a nice skimmer, cocked her arm, and let loose. The stone did four hits before it sank. She said, "The lab has done a complete job on the Gordons' two vehicles and their boat. On the deck of the boat they found very small slivers of rotted wood. Not driftwood. This was buried wood, still showing some soil. Any ideas?"

"Let me think about it."

"Okay. I also have a computer printout that shows that there are one thousand two hundred and twenty-four pistol permits issued to residents of Southold Township."

I asked, "Is Mr. Tobin on the pistol license list?"

"Actually, yes. I scanned the list and pulled a few names I knew. Tobin was one."

"What does Tobin pack?"

She glanced at me and said, "Two pieces—a 9-millimeter Browning and a Colt .45 automatic."

"Interesting."

Beth asked me, "Why?"

"Well, it turns out Tobin was closer to the Gordons than even I realized. Please continue."

She glanced at me again, then said, "Okay. Next we searched the wetlands to the north of the Gordons' house and found a place where a boat may have been dragged into the bulrushes. At about five thirty on Monday, the tide was near high and there was almost two feet of water there. You could pole a shallow-draft boat in through the reeds, and no one would see you on the boat."

I nodded.

She asked me, "Should I interview Fredric Tobin?"

I thought a moment, then replied, "Yes, you should."

"Are you going to give me any clues as to why?"

"You should forget drugs, bugs, vaccines, and anything to do with the Gordons' work."

"Tell me what you know."

"You're such a great detective. I'll just give you the clues, and you can figure it out—the rented house on the water with the speedboat, the acre of Wiley land, the Peconic Historical Society, the history of Plum Island and surrounding islands, the week in England. What else? . . . The numbers 44106818. . . . What else?"

"Fredric Tobin?"

"Possibly."

"How does he fit? Suspect? Witness?"

"Well, Mr. Tobin and his winery may be dead broke. So he may be a desperate man. And desperate men do desperate things."

Beth replied, "I'll check out his financials. Meanwhile, thanks for the great clues."

"It's all there, kid. Look for a common denominator."

She didn't like this game and said, "I have to go. I'll tell Max you solved the case, and he should give you a call." She started across the lawn toward the house. I followed.

Back in the kitchen, she began gathering her papers.

"By the way," I asked, "what do those two signal flags mean?"

"The flags are the letters B and V. In the phonetic alphabet they are Bravo Victor. The Bravo flag means 'dangerous cargo.' The Victor flag means 'require assistance.' Which would make sense if the Gordons were carrying dangerous microorganisms. Or even illegal drugs. This could have been a signal to their partner. But you say this has nothing to do with bugs or drugs."

"That's what I say."

She looked at me and said, "John, I'm investigating a *double murder*. They were your friends, and this is not a game. If you have information or evidence that you're holding back—"

"Hold on. I was minding my own business when Max comes calling with his hat in his hand. The next day I'm standing in an empty parking lot at the ferry with my thumb up my nose. And you take a two-day walk on me—"

"I was *working*. What were *you* doing?"

And so on. After about two minutes of this I said, "Truce. This is not productive."

She got herself under control and said, "I'm sorry, but you did indicate that after I told you about what I knew, you'd do the same."

"I will. But speak to Max first. It would be much better if you just briefed him from *your* notes and not from my theories."

She thought about that and nodded. "Okay. When can I hear your theories?"

"I just need a little more time. Meanwhile, see if you come up with what I came up with. I promise you if I get it all together, I'll hand it to you on a silver platter."

"That's very generous of you." She looked at her watch and said, "I have to meet Max."

We walked outside, and she got into her car. She said, "I'll see you tomorrow night at the Tobin party, if not sooner."

"Right. You can be Max's date." I smiled. "Thanks for stopping by."

She drove around the circle, but instead of heading down the driveway, she came tearing around again and jammed on her brakes. "John! You said the Gordons were digging for buried treasure. Like an important archaeological find on Plum Island—government land. They had to steal it from Plum Island and bury it on their own land—the Wiley property. Right?"

I smiled and gave her a thumbs-up. "Keep that to yourself."

"I understand. John, thanks."

"You're welcome."

I turned and walked off, down to the end of the dock. I've found that this is a good place to think.

A morning mist hung over the water, and I saw a small skiff making its way through the gray vapor. A cabin cruiser was going to cross its path, and the man in the skiff picked something up; then I heard a loud horn. I recalled seeing these aerosol cans that emitted a foghorn sound, a sort of poor man's version of an electric foghorn. It was a common enough sound on the water, so much so that you'd not even notice it on a sunny day. And if you heard it close by, you might not hear the sound of two quick gunshots. A poor man's silencer. Very clever, actually.

It was, indeed, all coming together now, even the tiny details. I was satisfied that I had the motive for murder—Captain Kidd's treasure. But I couldn't quite connect Tobin, Stevens, or anybody else to the murders.

I thought about all the people who'd died because of that gold—presumably the men whose ship Kidd attacked, then some of Kidd's own men, then Kidd himself, then who knew how many men and women over the last three centuries looking for the fabled treasure. Then Tom and Judy Gordon. I had an uneasy premonition that the chain of death wasn't going to stop there.

AT ABOUT noon I stopped by Whitestone Florist. I hadn't had breakfast, so I asked Emma to lunch, but she said she was busy. Fri-

days in flowerland were busy days. And there was Fredric's big soiree the next evening. I said, "Does he pay his bills?"

"No. That's why I get it up front with him."

I asked, "Can I bring you a sandwich?"

"No, thanks. I really have to get back to work."

"See you tomorrow."

I left and took a walk on Main Street. Somehow the nature of our relationship had changed. She was definitely a little cool.

I bought a sandwich and a beer in a deli, got in my Jeep, and drove to Tom and Judy's acre on the bluff. I sat on a rock and had my lunch. Captain Kidd's Ledge. Incredible.

I stood on the rock, and with my binocs I looked south, scanning the farms and vineyards until I spotted the Tower of Tobin the Terrible, rising above the flat glacial plain, the tallest thing out there.

I decided I wanted to get away. As I looked across the Sound at Connecticut, I had the idea to go to Foxwoods Resort Casino.

I drove to the Orient ferry, and in one hour and twenty minutes my Jeep and I were in New London, Connecticut.

I drove to Foxwoods, this sprawling gambling casino and hotel in the middle of nowhere—actually, on the land of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe. I checked in, bought some toiletries, went to my room, unpacked my toothbrush, then went down to the cavernous casino to meet my fate.

I was very lucky with blackjack, lost a little at craps, and got taken a wee bit at the roulette wheel. Afterward I retired to one of the bars, drank Scotch, and reran the entire case in my mind—from the time Max stepped on my porch to here and now. At three a.m. I went to bed.

I WOKE up on Saturday morning with that weird "Where am I?" feeling. Presently my head cleared, and I showered, dressed, packed my toothbrush, and had breakfast in the casino.

Outside, it was another beautiful late summer, almost autumn day. I got into my Jeep and headed south toward New London.

On the northern outskirts of the town I stopped at a service sta-

tion and asked directions. Within fifteen minutes I was on Ridgefield Road. I stopped at number seventeen, a typical white clapboard Cape Cod set about a hundred feet back. The nearest neighbors were some distance away. I got out of my Jeep and walked up the front path and rang the doorbell.

As I waited, a gray Ford pulled into the driveway, and out of it came Paul Stevens, wearing black slacks and a tan windbreaker. He greeted me warmly by saying, "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Just out for a drive and thought I'd stop by."

"Get off my property."

My goodness. I hadn't expected such a nasty greeting. This was a different Mr. Stevens from the one on Plum Island, who had been at least civil, if not friendly. I said, "Now, hold on, Paul."

"Are you deaf? I said get the hell out of here."

"Okay. But I have to get my partner." I motioned toward the house. "Beth Penrose. She's behind the house."

"You get in your car. I'll get her." He began walking away, then called back, "I should have you both arrested for trespassing. You're lucky I didn't get out of my car shooting."

I turned and walked back toward my Jeep. I looked over my shoulder in time to see him turn the corner of his garage.

I sprinted across the lawn, across the driveway, and caught up to him as he rounded the far end of the house and turned toward his backyard. He heard me, spun around, and reached for his gun, but much too late. I caught him on the chin with my fist, and he did a little backspring with his arms and legs askew.

I knelt beside poor Paul and patted him down, finding his little Saturday afternoon special—a 6.5-mm Beretta—tucked in the inside pocket of his windbreaker. I took the magazine out and emptied it, putting the rounds in my pocket. I cleared the chamber, replaced the magazine, and returned his piece.

I waited for him to bounce up and apologize for his behavior. But he just lay there, his stupid head rolling from side to side and dopey sounds coming out of his mouth. Presently he staggered to his feet.

I said to him, "Hey, Paul, who killed Tom and Judy?"

He seemed to remember something, and his right hand went into his jacket and came out with the peashooter. He said, "Hands on your head!"

"Okay." I put my hands on my head, and that seemed to make him feel a little better.

He was rubbing his jaw now, and you could tell it hurt. He said, "Who the hell do you think you are coming here like this and violating my privacy and my civil rights?" He was really, really ticked off and used a lot of profanity.

It is almost axiomatic in this business that guilty people proclaim their innocence and innocent people get totally ticked off and make all sorts of legal threats. Alas, Mr. Stevens seemed to be falling into the innocent category. I let him vent awhile.

Finally I got a word in edgewise and asked him, "Well, do you at least have any idea of who could have done it?"

"If I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"Does that mean I can't count on your cooperation?"

"Shut up!" He thought a moment, then said, "I should shoot you for trespassing, you stupid bastard. You're going to pay for hitting me." He was getting worked up again.

I walked over to him, and he pulled the trigger. I winced even though the gun was empty.

I used a left hook this time, not wanting to reinjure his right jaw. I hoped he'd appreciate that when he woke up.

Anyway, he toppled back onto the grass.

I knew he'd feel really terrible when he woke up, really stupid and embarrassed and all, and I felt bad for him. Well, maybe not. Anyway, fun guy that I am, I tied Mr. Stevens's shoelaces together.

I walked back to my Jeep, got in, and drove off. As I drove, I thought about Paul Stevens. The fact was that he was borderline crazy. But was he a murderer? He didn't seem to be, yet there was something about him. He knew something—I was convinced of that. And he was either protecting someone or blackmailing someone, or maybe he was trying to figure out how to turn a buck on this thing. In any case, he was now a hostile witness, to say the least.

TOBIN'S PLACE WAS BY Founders Landing in Southold. When I got there, I could see a waterfront park at the end of the road. To the east of the park was a big, big house—bigger than Uncle Harry's and more colonial than Victorian. The house was surrounded by a wrought-iron fence, with cars parked in front of it and up on the side lawn. I could hear music coming from the rear of the property.

I parked on the street and walked to an open gate. I wasn't sure of the attire, but I spotted a couple in front of me, and the guy was dressed pretty much like I was—blue blazer, no tie.

I found my way to the wide back lawn, which sloped down to the bay. There were striped tents, colored party lights strung from tree to tree, blazing torches, hurricane candles on the umbrellaed tables, flowers by Whitestone, a six-piece combo playing Big Band stuff, a few bars, and a long buffet table. And the weather was cooperating. Truly F. Tobin was blessed.

A pretty young woman wearing a period costume came up to me and said, "Good evening. Come and choose a hat."

"Excuse me?"

"You have to wear a hat to get a drink."

She led me to a long table on which were about two dozen idiotic hats—tricornered hats with feathers, plumes, or gold braid, or black pirate hats. I said, "I'll take the pirate hat."

She put one on my head. "You look dangerous."

"If you only knew."

She slid a plastic cutlass into my belt. "There you are," she said.

I walked farther onto the sweeping lawn, hatted and armed. The band was playing "Moonlight Serenade." I located the closest bar and asked for a beer.

The bartender, dressed in a pirate costume, said, "Sorry, sir. Only wine and soft drinks."

"*What?* That's outrageous. I need a beer. I have my hat."

"Yes, sir, but there's no beer."

I wandered around, beerless, and checked out the acreage. Mr. Tobin had a long dock, at the end of which was a good-sized boathouse. Also, several boats were tied up at the long dock, and I

assumed they belonged to guests. If this party had been held a week earlier, the *Spirochete* would have been here.

Anyway, curious sort that I am, I walked the length of the dock toward the boathouse. Right before the opening of the boathouse was a big cabin cruiser, a Chris-Craft about thirty-five feet long. It was named the *Autumn Gold.*

I entered the boathouse. It was dark, but there was enough light to see two boats, one on either side of the dock. The boat to the right was a small flat-bottomed Whaler of the type you could take into shallow water or wetlands. The other was a Formula 303, the exact same model as the Gordons'. But this 303 was named *Sondra,* presumably after Fredric's current squeeze.

Anyway, I lowered myself into the small Whaler. It had an outboard motor, and it also had oarlocks. There were two oars lying on the dock. More interesting, there was a pole, about six feet long, of the type used to move a boat through bulrushes. Also, in the stern was a compressed-air foghorn.

"Are you looking for something?"

I turned to see Fredric Tobin standing on the dock, wineglass in hand, wearing an elaborate purple tricornered hat with a flowing plume. He was stroking his short beard as he stared at me.

I said, "I was admiring your boat."

"*That* boat? Most people notice the speedboat." He was speaking to me with a tiny tone of irritation in his tiny voice, which I did not like.

I said, "Well, this little guy here is more in my price range." I smiled disarmingly. I do that before I mess with somebody big-time. "When I saw the Formula 303, I thought the Gordons had returned from the dead."

He did not like that at all. He said coolly, "The party is on the lawn, Mr. Corey."

"I noticed." I climbed up to the dock.

He said, "Let me introduce you to some of my guests."

"That would be terrific."

And off we went, out of the boathouse and along the dock.

I said, "I was just talking to somebody about Tom and Judy and their love of wine and how they were so pleased to know you. Anyway, this person happened to mention that she also knew you and knew Tom and Judy. Do you know Emma Whitestone?"

He may have broken his stride a bit, then continued. He said, "Yes. We dated about a year ago."

"And you stayed friends?"

"Why not?"

"All my exes want to murder me."

"I can't imagine why."

I chuckled at that one. I mean, it was odd that I still kinda liked this guy, even though I suspected that he'd murdered my friends.

We were back on the lawn, and Mr. Tobin reminded me, "You will not question any of my guests about the Gordon murders."

"I promise. But I need a beer."

Mr. Tobin saw a young lady with a tray of wine and said to her, "Please get this gentleman a beer. Pour it into a wineglass."

"Yes, sir." And off she went.

Mr. Tobin excused himself and left me standing alone. It was deep dusk now, and the colored party lights twinkled, the torches blazed, the candles glowed. The band was playing "Stardust." I watched Fredric work the party, person by person, group by group, laughing, joking, being the most perfect host ever.

The man had some cool—I'll give him that. He was near broke, if I could believe Emma Whitestone, and he was a double murderer, if I could believe my instincts. And he must have known that I knew both his secrets, yet he was not ruffled. He was more concerned that I not mess up his party than that I might mess up his life.

The serving girl returned with the wineglass of beer on a tray. "There's more in the refrigerator." She winked and moved off.

I tilted my hat rakishly and began working the party.

It was mostly a young and early-middle-age crowd. I noticed a woman in a white, sort of silky dress, wearing the required chapeau, from which fell long blond hair. I recognized her as Lord Freddie's

little thing, who the Gordons had pointed out to me at the winetasting. She was crossing the lawn alone, so I set course and intercepted. "Good evening," I said.

She smiled. "Good evening."

"I'm John Corey."

The name obviously meant nothing to her, and she kept smiling. She said, "I'm Sondra Wells. A friend of Fredric Tobin."

"Yes, I know. We met in July at the vineyard. A winetasting. I was with the Gordons."

Her smile dropped, and she said, "Oh, that was terrible."

"It certainly was. You were close to the Gordons?"

"Freddie was. I liked them, but I don't know if they liked me."

"I'm sure they did. They always spoke highly of you." Actually, they never spoke of her at all.

She smiled again.

I said to Ms. Wells, "Do you like boating?"

"No, I don't. Fredric seems to enjoy it."

"I love to boat. In fact, I'm sure I saw Mr. Tobin . . . let's see, last Monday, about cocktail time, I guess, in his little Whaler. I thought I saw you with him."

She thought a moment, then said, "Oh . . . Monday. I was in Manhattan all day. Fredric had a car and driver take me and the housekeeper to the city, and I spent the day shopping."

I saw her little brain working, and a frown passed over her lips. "You saw Fredric in the Whaler with a . . . another person?"

"Perhaps it wasn't him." I had now placed Ms. Wells and the housekeeper in Manhattan at the time of the murders. How convenient. I asked her, "Do you share Fredric's interests in local history and archaeology?"

She replied, "No, I don't. And I'm glad he's given it up. Of all the hobbies a man can have, why that one?"

"It might have had something to do with the Peconic Historical Society's archivist."

She gave me a very cool look indeed and would surely have walked away, except that Fredric himself popped up and said to

Ms. Wells, "May I steal you a moment? The Fishers want to say hello." Fredric looked at me and said, "You'll excuse us?"

"I guess, unless the Fishers want to say hello to me, too."

Fredric gave me an unpleasant smile, and off they went.

About eight thirty I saw Max and Beth. Max also had on a pirate hat, and Beth had a sort of silly bonnet on her head. She was wearing white slacks and a blue-and-white-striped boat top. She looked different. I walked over to them at the long buffet.

Beth said, "Nice evening. Thank you for suggesting I come."

"You never know what you can learn by listening."

Max said to me, "You never returned any of my phone calls."

"No. I should have kicked you off my porch."

"Well, I apologize if I caused you any inconvenience."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Actually, I wasn't that angry with Max, and even if I had been, it's hard to stay angry with Max. Basically, he's a good egg, and his only real fault is that he *always* looks out for number one.

I said, "I need a beer," and walked off.

I saw my favorite server, and she saw me. She had a glass of beer on her tray and handed it to me.

Beth caught up to me and said, "I want to talk about the case."

"Not here, and not now. This can wait until tomorrow. If I'm right, then our man is right over there, and he's hosting a party. I'd keep him under surveillance tomorrow. Just don't spook him."

"Okay, but—"

"We'll meet tomorrow, and I'll give you the whole thing. Then I'm through with it. Monday I'm heading back to Manhattan. I have medical and professional appointments all day Tuesday. Okay? Tomorrow. Promise."

"Okay." She went off to join the party.

I saw Emma in the distance. She was speaking with a group of people among whom was Fredric Tobin, ex-lover and suspected murderer. I looked around, realizing again that Tom and Judy would have been here tonight. Instead they were in cold storage, and their probable killer was about fifty feet from me, talking to a

woman I'd become very fond of. In fact, I noticed that Tobin and Emma were alone now, talking tête-à-tête.

I'd had enough of this and made my way around the side of the house, discarding my hat and sword on the way. About halfway across the front lawn, I heard my name called, but I kept walking.

"John!"

I turned.

Emma hurried across the lawn. "Where are you going?"

"Someplace where I can get a beer."

"I'll go with you."

"No. I don't need the company."

She informed me, "You need lots of company, my friend. That's your problem. Where are you going?"

"Ye Olde Towne Taverne."

"My favorite dive. Have you had their nacho platter?" She took my arm, and off we went.

I got in her old car, and within twenty minutes we were ensconced in a booth at the Olde Towne Taverne, beers in hand, nachos and chicken wings on the way. We talked awhile, and I said to her, "I'm assuming you didn't say anything to Fredric about what we've been discussing."

She hesitated, then replied, "I didn't, but I did tell him that you and I were dating." She smiled. "Are we dating?"

"Archivists are always dating—July 4, 1776, December 7, 1941—"

"Be serious."

"Okay, I seriously wish you hadn't mentioned me at all."

She shrugged. "He wished me luck."

"What a gentleman."

She smiled. "Are you jealous?"

"Not at all." *I'm going to see him fry.* "I think you should not discuss us with him and certainly not discuss pirate treasure."

"Okay."

And so we had a pleasant dinner and then went to her place, a cute little cottage in a residential section of Cutchogue. There was no cat, she had Scotch and beer, the mattress was firm, she liked the

Beatles and the Bee Gees, and she had two pillows for me. What more could I ask?

THE next morning, Sunday, we went out for breakfast at the Cutchogue Diner, then without asking me, she drove us to church, a nice clapboard Methodist church. She explained, "I'm not a fanatic about it, but it gives me a lift sometimes."

So I attended church, ready to dive under the pew if the ceiling caved in.

After church we retrieved my car in front of Mr. Tobin's mansion, and Emma followed me back to my mansion.

While Emma made tea for herself, I left messages for Beth at her office and her house that I'd be out all day and I'd try to speak to her tonight. If not, she should come to my place tomorrow morning for coffee. Feeling that I'd done what I could to keep my promise, I went into the kitchen and said, "Let's take a Sunday drive."

"Sounds good to me."

She drove her car home, and I followed. Then we went to Orient Point in my Jeep and took the New London ferry. We spent the day visiting the mansions in Newport, having dinner in Mystic, then took the ferry back. We stood on the deck and watched the stars.

The ferry passed through Plum Island Gut, and I could see the Orient Point Lighthouse on the right. To the left the stone Plum Island Lighthouse was dark and forbidding against the night sky.

The Gut was choppy, and Emma remarked, "That storm's tracking this way. The seas get rough long before the weather moves in." She added, "Also, the barometer drops. Can you feel it?"

"Uh . . ." I stuck my tongue out. "Not yet."

She laughed.

As the ferry approached the slip, she asked me, "Do you want to stay at my place tonight?"

"Well . . . I do, but I should go home."

"I can stay at your place."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was supposed to talk to Detective Penrose today, and I should see if I can still do that."

"All right."

And we left the matter there.

I dropped her off at her home. I said to her, "I'll see you tomorrow after work."

"Good. There's a nice restaurant on the water that I'd like to take you to."

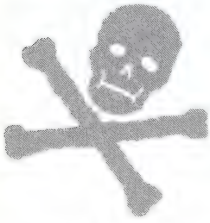
"Looking forward to it." We kissed on her doorstep, and I got into my Jeep and drove home.

There were five messages for me. I was in no mood for them and went to bed without playing them. As I drifted off, I tried to figure out what to do about Fredric Tobin. There is a critical moment when you have to decide if you should keep stalking your man, confront him, smoke him out, or pretend to lose interest in him.

I should have also been thinking that when you corner a man, he can become dangerous—that the game is played by both hunter and hunted and that the hunted has a lot more to lose.

But I forgot to consider Tobin as a cunning animal because he struck me as such a fop, the same way I'd struck him as a simpleton. We both knew better, but we'd both been lulled a little bit by each other's act. In any event, I blame myself for what happened.

Chapter Eight



IT WAS raining Monday when I woke up, the first rain we'd had in weeks. As I dressed, I listened to the radio and heard that a hurricane named Jasper was off the coast of Virginia, causing unsettled weather conditions as far north as New York's Long Island. I was glad I was driving back to Manhattan today. I hadn't been to my Seventy-second Street condo in over a month, and I hadn't accessed my answering-machine messages either, because I forgot my access code.

Anyway, at about nine a.m. I went downstairs, dressed in designer jeans and polo shirt. I took the local weekly paper out on the back porch with a mug of coffee and dawdled for a long time, reading, watching the weather, working the case in my mind, waiting for Beth, who I thought should have arrived by now.

Finally I went inside through the French doors that led to the den and played the messages on my answering machine.

Number one was from Uncle Harry saying he had a friend who wanted to rent the house, so would I mind buying it or leaving; two, an unplayed message from Emma, a little before midnight on Friday, just saying hello; three, Max on Saturday morning with the particulars on the Tobin party. Four was Beth on Sunday morning asking where I'd disappeared to Saturday night and when could we meet. And number five was Beth on Sunday afternoon, acknowledging my message to her office and saying she'd be at my house on Monday morning.

So when the doorbell rang a little before noon, I wasn't too surprised to see Beth there. I said, "Come in."

She left her umbrella on the porch and came in. She was wearing another tailored suit, this one sort of a rust color.

I thought I should say I was alone, so I said, "I'm alone."

She said, "I know."

We looked at each other for some very long seconds. I knew what she was going to say, but I didn't want to hear it. She said it anyway. "Emma Whitestone was found in her house by one of her employees this morning, dead, apparently murdered."

I said nothing. What could I say? I just stood there.

Beth led me into the living room to the couch. "Sit down," she said. I sat. She sat beside me and took my hand. She said, "I know you must have been fond of her."

I nodded. I couldn't quite grasp it, because it didn't seem real. I said to Beth, "I was with her until about ten last night."

Beth said, "We have no time of death yet. She was found in her bed . . . apparently killed by blows to the head with a fireplace poker that was found on the floor. There was no sign of forced

entry, but there was the appearance of a burglary—pocketbook emptied, cash gone, jewelry box emptied."

I took a deep breath and said nothing.

Beth then told me, "Also, the Murphys are both dead. Apparently also murdered."

"My God."

Beth said, "A Southold PD was patrolling their street, but he didn't see anything." She added, "When a new shift came on at eight a.m., the officer noticed that the newspaper was still on the lawn. He knew that the Murphys rose early and took the paper in, so he knocked on the front door, then went around back and saw that the door was unlocked. He found them in their bed, both dead of apparent head injuries caused by a crowbar that he found on the floor with blood on it. The house was ransacked."

I nodded.

Beth said, "I think that whoever killed the Gordons could have taken the Murphys' key from the Gordon house, and that's why there was no forced entry." She added, "That would indicate some premeditation."

I nodded. Tobin knew he might have to get rid of the Murphys at some point and thought ahead far enough to take the key. When Beth mentioned that the Murphys' key was not found in the Gordon house, that should have alerted us. I said, "We should have predicted . . ."

She nodded. "I know." She continued, "As for Emma Whitestone . . . Well, either she left her door unlocked or, again, someone had the key . . . someone she knew."

I looked at Beth and saw that we both knew who she was talking about. In fact, she said, "I had that surveillance put on Fredric Tobin Sunday all day, but some higher-ups called it off from midnight to eight . . . for budgetary reasons. I didn't have anything on him to warrant around-the-clock surveillance."

I was paying attention, but my mind kept returning to images of Emma—at my house, swimming in the bay, at the historical society party, in her bedroom, where she was found murdered. . . . What

if I'd spent the night there? It occurred to me that Tobin would have killed me, too, if he'd found me there, sleeping beside her. I pictured him talking to Emma on the lawn at his party. He must have known he was going to murder her. I wondered, though, if he decided to kill her to keep her from talking to me anymore or if he just wanted to say, "Damn you, Corey, for being a wiseass, for figuring out I killed the Gordons."

Beth said, "I feel a little responsible for the Murphys."

I forced myself to think about the Murphys. They were decent people, helpful citizens. I said, "I brought a photo of Fredric Tobin to the Murphys on Wednesday, and they ID'ed him as the guy with the white sports car. Tobin owns a white Porsche."

Beth nodded. "I see."

I said, "The murderer is Fredric Tobin."

She didn't reply.

I stood and said, "I need some air." I went out back and stood on the porch. The rain was heavier now—gray rain falling from a gray sky into a gray sea. The wind was coming off the bay from the south.

Emma. Emma.

I was still in the shock and denial stage, working up to the anger stage. The more I thought about Tobin bashing her head in, the more I wanted to bash his head in. Like a lot of cops who have a personal encounter with crime, I wanted to use my power and knowledge to take care of it myself. But a cop can't be a vigilante. On the other hand, there were times when you had to put the badge away and keep the gun. . . .

Beth left me alone for a while, during which time I was able to get myself together. Finally she came out on the back porch and gave me a mug of coffee laced with what smelled like brandy.

We both stood silently, watching the bay. After a few minutes she asked me, "What is this all about, John?"

I knew that I owed her some information. "Gold," I replied. "Buried treasure, maybe the treasure of Captain Kidd himself."

"And it was on Plum Island?"

"Yes. As far as I can guess, Tobin somehow got onto this, and re-

alizing he could never get access to the island, he began looking for a partner who had unlimited access."

She nodded, then said, "Sit down." I sat in my wicker chair, and she sat in the rocker. "Tell me all of it. Go ahead."

I spent the next hour briefing her, telling her everything I'd done since we parted Tuesday night. When I finished, Beth said, "So the Gordons' purchase of the Wiley property was not to double-cross Tobin."

"No. Tobin *told* the Gordons to buy the land, based on this legend of Captain Kidd's Ledges. Tobin knew that any bluff in the area would do, but he didn't want it to get around that he was buying useless land up on the bluffs—that would lead to all sorts of gossip and speculation. The plan then was to wait awhile before burying the treasure, then discovering it. They intended to tuck the treasure chest into the side of that ledge that we found and then say it was exposed by erosion. Then, when they hacked it loose, the site would be basically destroyed."

She thought a moment, then asked me, "But how was Tobin to get in on the money after the Gordons announced their find?"

"First of all, these three established that they'd been friends for almost two years." I explained what I'd discovered from Emma about the nature of the relationship. "Here's what I think. First they pretended they had developed a mutual interest in local history, and eventually that interest led to some information on pirate treasure. At this point, according to what they were going to put out to the press, they entered into a friendly agreement to search for and share whatever they found."

I sat back and listened to the wind and rain. I felt about as bad as I'd ever felt in my life, and I was surprised at how much I missed Emma, who'd come into my life so quickly and unexpectedly, then moved into another life.

I continued. "But Tobin had no intention of sharing anything with the Gordons. They were the solution to his problem of how to locate the treasure and move it from Plum Island. Then the Gordons became a liability, an obvious clue to where the treasure had

actually come from. Most likely, Tobin intended to bury the treasure on his own property near Founders Landing, which is also an old historical site, and discover the treasure there."

Beth sat with her chin in her hand, her feet hooked over the front rung of the rocker. She asked, "So where is the treasure?"

"That's a very good question." I looked out at the rolling water. There wasn't a boat in sight, of course, and debris was starting to blow across the lawn. "The answer may be in Mr. Tobin's home, office, or apartment."

She thought a moment, then said, "I'll request that the D.A.'s office apply for a search warrant."

"If you can get a search warrant without probable cause, you're a lot smarter than I am."

Beth said to me, "Well, I think I can nail this guy if he did it. You're sure it was him?"

"I'm sure."

"Well, maybe we can catch a break at the two new murder scenes." She looked at me and said, "I'd like you to work this case with me. Will you do that?"

I took her arm and led her inside to the kitchen. "Call his office, and see if he's there. Thank him for a wonderful party."

She dialed information, got the number of Tobin Vineyards, and dialed. She said, "Mr. Tobin, please. This is Detective Penrose of the Suffolk County Police Department."

She listened, then said, "Just tell him I called to thank him for a wonderful evening." She hung up and said to me, "He's not in, not expected, and she doesn't know where to reach him."

"Okay. Call his house."

She found Tobin's unlisted number in her notebook and dialed. She said to me, "To thank him for a wonderful evening?"

"You lost your grandmother's gold locket on his lawn."

"Right." She said into the phone, "Is Mr. Tobin in?" She listened, then asked, "Is Ms. Wells in, then?" She listened again, then said, "Thank you. . . . No, no message. . . . No, don't be frightened. You should go to a designated emergency shelter. . . . Well, then

call the police or fire department, and they'll come and get you. Okay? Do that now." Beth hung up. "The housekeeper. Eastern European lady. Doesn't like hurricanes."

"I'm not too keen on them either. Where is Mr. Tobin?"

"He's absent without explanation. Ms. Wells has gone to Manhattan until the storm blows over."

The wind took a chair off my porch, and the lights flickered. I said to Beth, "Let's take a ride."

"Where?"

"To find Fredric Tobin—so we can thank him for a wonderful evening."

THE rain was heavy, and the wind sounded like a freight train.

I found two yellow ponchos in the coat closet and retrieved my .38, which I wore in my shoulder holster. The next thing to do was to get out of the driveway, which was covered with limbs and debris. I started the Jeep, threw it into gear, and ran over the fallen branches. I said to Beth, "Fourteen-inch clearance, four-wheel drive."

"Does it float?"

"We may find out."

I drove through the narrow lanes of Mattituck, over more fallen limbs and past sailing trash-can lids. I said, "I haven't been out in the country during a hurricane since I was a kid."

Beth informed me, "This isn't the hurricane, John."

I drove around a toppled tree. "Looks like a hurricane to me."

"It has to reach wind speeds of sixty-five knots to be a hurricane. Now it's a tropical storm."

THE ride to Founders Landing took an hour because of the storm. It occurred to me that I wasn't going to get back to Manhattan to make my mandatory meeting, and thus I was in deep doo-doo on the job. I realized I didn't care.

I thought again of Emma, and it occurred to me that had she lived, my life would have gotten happier. I'd actually pictured my-

self here with Emma Whitestone, fishing, swimming, whatever people did out here. It occurred to me that all my North Fork connections were ended—Aunt June was dead, Uncle Harry was selling his place, the Gordons were dead, and now Emma was gone, too. I glanced at Beth Penrose.

She sensed my glance and looked back at me. Our eyes met, and she said, "The sky is very beautiful after a storm passes."

I nodded. "Thanks."

The wrought-iron gates to the Tobin property were shut, and Beth said, "I'll get out and see if they're locked," but in the interest of time, I drove through them.

Beth said, "Are you crazy? Stop! This is trespassing, not to mention any civil rights violations—"

"I found the gate broken in."

"John—"

"You want to go back? This is my felony."

We looked at one another, and she gave me that look that said, "I know you're angry, but don't do this." But then she replied, "The gates were broken in. We're investigating."

As we moved up the long drive, I could see that the lawn where we'd had our party not so long ago was covered with debris. The bay was wild, big waves breaking onto the grass itself. Tobin's dock was holding up all right, but the boathouse had a lot of missing shingles. I said, "That's funny. The Chris-Craft is missing."

Beth said, "Well, it must be in dry dock somewhere. No one would go out on the water on a night like this."

I didn't see any cars in the driveway, and the house was completely dark. I drove to the two-car garage, veered right, and drove the Jeep into the garage door. I peered out the windshield and saw the white Porsche in front of me, with a section of the garage door on top of it, and a Ford Bronco on the other side. I said to Beth, "Two cars here. Maybe the bastard's home."

"Let me handle him."

"Of course." I whipped the Jeep around and drove to the rear of the house. We got out, and Beth rang the doorbell. We stood

under the door canopy, but no one answered, so I grabbed an axe next to a woodpile and opened the door with the axe. Beth said, "John, for God's sake, calm down."

We entered the kitchen. The electricity was off, and it was dark and quiet. I said to Beth, "Cover this door."

I went into the center hall and called up the stairs, "Mr. Tobin!" I heard a creak on the floor overhead, and I dropped the axe, drew my .38, and charged up the stairs. I swung around the newel-post and shouted, "Hands up! Police! Police!"

I heard a noise in one of the bedrooms, and I charged in. A woman screamed. And screamed again. She was about fifty, probably the housekeeper. I said, "Where is Mr. Tobin?"

She covered her face with her hands.

"Where is Mr. Tobin?"

Beth brushed past me and took the woman's arm. She said, "Everything is okay. We're the police."

After a minute we learned that the woman's name was Eva, that her English was not good, and that Mr. Tobin was not home.

"He take the boat."

"The *boat?*" Beth asked.

"Yes. I watch him."

I led Eva to the window. I said, "Which way did the boat go?" I motioned with my hands.

She pointed to the left. "Go that way."

I looked at the bay. The Chris-Craft, the *Autumn Gold,* had headed east, but I couldn't see anything except waves.

Beth asked Eva, "*When* did he leave? Ten minutes? Twenty?"

"Maybe ten. Maybe more. Tell me to stay here. To not be afraid. But I am afraid."

Beth took Eva by the hand and led her downstairs into the kitchen. I followed. Beth said, "Find candles, matches, and a flashlight. If you are afraid, go to the basement. Okay?"

Eva nodded and went to a cupboard to get candles.

I said to Eva, "Did you see him carrying anything to the boat?" I did a little pantomime. "In his hands?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"Gun. Long gun." She held up two fingers and said, "Two."

Beth and I looked at each other.

Eva said, "And to dig."

"Shovel?"

"Yes. Shovel."

I said to Eva, "Keys. Where are the keys?"

She led us to a keyboard beside the wall phone. The keys for the Chris-Craft were missing, but the Formula key was still there.

Eva said, "Downstairs. Down to cellar." She was pointing to a door at the far end of the kitchen. She said, "He go downstairs. Something downstairs."

I could see fear in her eyes, and I knew it was more than the hurricane. I had no doubt Tobin would have murdered her if it weren't for the inconvenience of having a dead body on the property.

I walked to the door and turned the knob. The door opened, revealing a narrow dark staircase leading down to the basement. I said to Beth, "You're free to leave anytime."

Ms. Do-Right seemed to have an epiphany, an understanding that we were both in so deep, we might as well break any laws we may have missed. She got a flashlight from Eva and handed it to me. "You first, hero. I'll cover."

"Right." I went first, carrying the flashlight in one hand and the axe in the other. Beth drew her 9-mm and followed.

It was a very old stone cellar with less than a seven-foot clearance. At first glance it seemed that there wasn't much down there. Then the flashlight beam rested on a long brick wall at the far end. In the center of the wall was a carved oak door. My flashlight picked out a brass sign on the door that read WINE CELLAR.

I handed Beth the flashlight and tried the big brass handle, but the door was locked. After a few whacks with the axe the door swung open.

The flashlight illuminated a row of wine racks. Beth moved the light around the room. There was a table in the center, on which

were two candelabra and some candlesticks. There were packs of matches on the table, and I lit about ten candles, which cast a flickering glow around the wine cellar and danced off the bottles.

There were wooden crates and cardboard wine boxes piled here and there. We poked around awhile, until finally I said, "What was Eva trying to tell us?"

Beth shrugged. "Maybe we should look at those crates and boxes."

In a corner, where the two foundation walls met, was a stack of Tobin Vineyards wine boxes, all labeled AUTUMN GOLD. I went over to them and started pitching them off into an aisle between two wine racks. The sound of breaking glass filled the room, as did the smell of wine.

Beth said, "You don't have to ruin good wine. Take it easy. Hand the boxes to me."

I ignored her and said, "Move out of the way."

As I pitched the last layer of boxes away, there, in the corner, between the wine boxes was something that wasn't wine. In fact, it was an aluminum ice chest. I stared at it in the candlelight.

Beth came up beside me, shining the flashlight on the chest. She said, "Is that the aluminum chest from the Gordons' boat?"

"It certainly looks like it. But unless it has their fingerprints on it, which I'm sure it doesn't, then we'll never know for sure." I turned toward the door and started to leave.

"Wait. Aren't you going to . . . I mean—"

"Open it? Are you crazy? And tamper with evidence? We don't even belong here. We don't have a search—"

"Cut it out! Open the damned chest. . . . No, I'll open it. Hold this." She handed me the flashlight and crouched in front of the chest. "Give me a handkerchief or something."

I handed her my handkerchief, and with it in her hand, she opened the latch, then lifted the hinged lid. I kept the beam of the flashlight pointed at the chest. I guess we expected to see gold and jewels, but before the lid was fully open, what we saw staring back at us was a human skull. I moved the flashlight around the interior

of the chest. The skull sat among some bones. The skull itself had a copper coin in each eye socket, thick with verdigris.

Beth said, "It's part of a human skeleton. A child."

"No. A small adult. People were smaller then."

"Why is there a skeleton— What is that other stuff?"

Beth handed me the handkerchief, and I reached into the chest and extracted something unpleasant to the touch. I held it up to the flashlight. "Rotted wood." On closer examination I found brass fittings covered with verdigris, some iron nails which were mostly rust, and a piece of rotted cloth.

The bones were reddish brown, and soil and clay still clung to them, indicating they weren't buried in a coffin but had lain in the earth for a long time.

I also found a rusted iron padlock and four gold coins, which I gave to Beth. I stood and wiped my hand on the handkerchief. "Captain Kidd's treasure."

She looked at the four gold coins in her hand. *"This?"*

"That's part of it. What I see here is part of a wooden chest—pieces from the lid that was forced open, I would guess."

She pointed to the skull and said, "Who's *that?*"

"I guess that's the guardian of the treasure. Sometimes some unlucky guy was murdered and thrown in on top of the chest. And for those who may have seen people burying something or saw fresh earth, if they dug, the first thing they saw was a corpse, and they might think it was only a grave. Clever, yes?"

"I guess. It would keep *me* from digging any further."

The contents of the aluminum chest didn't smell all that good, so I bent over and closed the lid. I said to Beth, "I suppose this was all going to be displayed at some place and time, along with the gold and jewels."

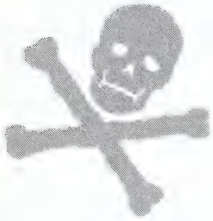
"But *where* is the treasure?"

"If bones could speak, I'm sure he'd tell us."

She glanced at me and said, "Well, you were right. I congratulate you on a remarkable piece of detective work."

"Thank you," I said. "Let's get some fresh air."

Chapter Nine



WE WENT back upstairs and saw that Eva was no longer in the kitchen. Beth said to me, "I may have enough here to get a search warrant."

"No, you don't. What we found here is not connected in any way to any of the murders except through circumstantial evidence."

Beth said, "But I have human remains here. That's a start."

"That's true. It's worth a phone call." I added, "Don't mention that the bones could be about three hundred years old."

Beth picked up the wall phone. "Dead," she said.

I gave her my car keys. "Try my cell phone."

She went out the back door and jumped in the Jeep. I saw her dial and speak to someone.

I walked around the ground floor of the house. It was decorated in what appeared to be real antiques. The style and period seemed mostly English country stuff, maybe mid-1800s. Above the fireplace in a small den off the living room were rifle pegs for two weapons, but neither weapon was there.

I went to the kitchen as Beth came back in the house. She gave me my keys and said, "There are forensic and homicide people on the way here, but it'll take them a while to get through this storm. Look, you don't need to speak to the county cops when they get here. Take off, and I'll handle it."

"Good idea." I tossed my car keys back to her. "See you later."

"Where are you going without your keys?"

"For a boat ride." I took the Formula key from the keyboard and headed toward the back door.

Beth held my arm. "No, John. Are you crazy? You'll get killed out there. We'll catch up with Fredric Tobin later."

"I want him now, with fresh blood on his hands."

"John, you don't even know where he went."

"There's only one place he would go on a night like this in a boat—Plum Island."

"But why?"

"I think the treasure is still there."

I left and headed across the lawn toward the boat. The wind was really howling, and there was almost no daylight left, which was fine, because I didn't want to see what the water looked like. I reached the boathouse, which was creaking and groaning. In the dim light I saw that the Formula 303 was still there, but I noticed that the Whaler was gone.

I stared at the Formula rising and falling on the swells and thumping against the rubber bumpers on the floating dock. I thought I saw Tom and Judy on board, smiling and motioning for me to join them. Then an image of Emma flashed in my mind, and I saw her swimming in the bay, smiling at me. And then I saw Tobin's face at his party as he was speaking to her, knowing he was going to kill her.

The next thing I knew, I was jumping into the speedboat. I caught my balance on the pitching deck and made my way to the right-hand seat. I tried to recall what I'd seen the Gordons do. I remembered to put both gear selectors in neutral, put the key in the ignition, move it to ON. Nothing was happening. I saw two buttons marked START and pushed the right one. The starboard engine turned over and fired. Then I pressed the second button, and the port engine started. I felt them running a little rough, and I pushed both throttles slightly forward and gave them more gas. While the engines were warming, I found a knife in the open glove compartment and cut the spring line, then both mooring lines, and the Formula immediately rolled with a wave.

The bow was pointed to the bay, so all I had to do was push forward on the throttles, and I would be out into the storm. Just as I was about to do this, I heard something behind me and looked over my shoulder. It was Beth, calling my name over the noise of the wind, water, and motors.

"John! Wait! I'm coming!" She jumped and landed on the rolling deck behind me, then fell.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm okay!" She stood, then made her way to the left-hand seat and said, "Let's go."

I pushed the throttles forward, and we cleared the boathouse into the driving rain. A second later I saw a huge wave coming at us from the right, and it was going to hit us broadside. I cut the wheel right and got the bow into the wave. The boat rode up, hung on to the crest. Then the wave broke behind me, leaving the boat literally in midair. The boat came down, bow first, digging into the swelling sea. Then the bow rose, and the stern hit the water. The propellers caught, and we were off, heading east.

Beth called out over the noise of the storm, "Do you know what you're doing?"

"I think so." I looked at her and said, "Thanks for coming."

She said, "Drive."

The Formula was at half throttle, which is how I think you're supposed to keep control in a storm. I mean, we seemed to be above the water about half the time, flying over the troughs, then slicing right into the oncoming waves, where the propellers would whine, then bite into the water and shoot us forward like a surfboard into the oncoming sea again.

Beth called out, "Do you know how to navigate?"

"Sure. Look for the channel markers."

"I don't see any markers," she informed me.

"Then I'll just stay to the right of the double white line."

She didn't reply.

I tried to get my head into a nautical frame of mind. Boating is not my number one hobby, but I'd been a guest on a lot of boats. I figured I'd sucked up some facts. And in June, July, and August I'd been out with the Gordons about a dozen times. In fact, I was sure I knew more about boats than I realized. I hoped so.

We were now well into the Peconic Bay, and the boat was slamming very hard into the water—jarring, teeth-rattling thumps, one

after the other, like a car driving over railroad ties. I couldn't see a thing through the windshield, so I stood and looked over it.

Through the rain I could see the shoreline to my left about two hundred yards, and up ahead to my right I could see the dim outline of Shelter Island. I knew we would be a little safer once I got into the protected passage on the leeward side of the island. I said to Beth, "I can put you ashore on Shelter Island."

"Steer the boat and stop worrying about frail little Beth." She added in a nicer tone of voice, "I've been on rough water before, John. I know when to panic."

"Good. Tell me when."

"Close," she said. "Meanwhile, I'm going below to get some life vests and see if I can find something more comfortable to wear."

She disappeared down the companionway into the cabin.

I stood with one hand on the wheel, one on top of the windshield to keep my balance. I peered into the driving rain, scanning the heaving sea for a boat—a Chris-Craft to be exact.

Beth came up the stairs and handed me a life vest. "Put this on." She took the wheel as I put on the life vest. I saw that she had a pair of binoculars around her neck. She also had a pair of jeans under her yellow slicker and was wearing a pair of boating shoes as well as an orange life vest. I asked, "Are you wearing Fredric's clothes?"

"I hope not. I think these belong to Sondra Wells." She added, "I looked for a radio down there, but I didn't see one. We're out of touch. We can't even send an SOS."

"Well, neither could the people on the *Mayflower*."

She ignored me and said, "I found a signal pistol." She tapped the big pocket of her slicker.

I took the helm again, and Beth stood beside me. We were both soaked, our stomachs were churning, and we were scared. Yet some of the terror of riding through the storm had passed, I think, as we realized that every wave was not going to sink us.

I was approaching the passage between the south coastline of the North Fork and Shelter Island, but the sea seemed to be worse at the mouth of the strait.

Beth said, "This is crazy. Can the bilge pumps keep up with the water we're taking on?"

"I guess. Depends on how many waves break on board." In fact, I'd noticed the response to the helm was sluggish, the result of the weight of the water now in the bilge and cabin. I also noticed the fuel gauge for the first time. It read about an eighth full, which meant about ten gallons left. I wondered if we could make it to Plum Island. I said to Beth, "Is it a hurricane yet?"

"I don't know, John, and I don't give a damn."

"I'm with you."

Finally we got into the passage between the North Fork and Shelter Island. The island had enough elevation to block at least some of the wind, and the seas were just a bit calmer.

Beth asked me, "What do you think happened that day? The day of the murders."

I replied, "We know the Gordons left the harbor at Plum Island about noon. They went far enough offshore so that the patrol boat couldn't identify them. The Gordons waited and watched with binoculars and saw the patrol pass. They then raced toward the beach. They had up to sixty minutes before the boat came around again."

She nodded. "Go on."

"Okay, the Gordons take their rubber raft onto the beach and drag it into the bush. On the raft is the aluminum chest."

"And shovels."

"No. They've already uncovered this treasure and hidden it where they could get at it easily. But first they had to do a lot of groundwork, like archival and archaeological work, buying the Wiley land, and so forth."

Beth thought a moment, then asked, "Do you think the Gordons were holding out on Tobin?"

"I don't think so. The Gordons would be satisfied with half the treasure, minus half of that to the government. Tobin's needs, however, were different, and his agenda was different. He had no scruples about killing his partners, taking the whole treasure, fencing

most of it, and then discovering a small portion of it on his own land and holding an auction at Sotheby's, complete with media and the IRS guy in the back."

The landmasses around me looked black, like piles of coal, while the sea and sky were an eerie gray luminescence. Normally, at this hour you could see lights onshore, but apparently, the power was out all over, and the coasts had slipped back a century or two.

Beth said, "So the Gordons didn't have time to go back for a second load before the patrol boat came around again, did they?"

"Right," I answered. "Their rubber raft could hold only so much, and they didn't want to leave the bones and so forth unguarded on the Formula while they went back for a second trip."

Beth nodded and said, "So they decided to come back for the main treasure some other time."

"Right. Probably that very night, if the temporary clove hitch was an indication. They had to pass Tobin's house on Founders Landing on the way back to their house. I have no doubt they pulled into his boathouse, maybe intending to leave the bones at his house. When they saw that the Whaler was gone, they figured Tobin was gone, so they continued on to their house."

"Where they surprised Tobin."

"Right. He'd already ransacked their house to simulate a burglary, as well as to see if they were holding out on any treasure."

"Also, he'd want to see if there was any incriminating evidence in their house linking them to him."

"Exactly."

"And when the Gordons pulled into their dock, Tobin's Whaler was in the wetlands nearby."

"Yes." I thought a minute and said, "We'll probably never know what happened next, but at some point all three of them knew that their partnership had ended. Tobin raised his gun, pressed on the handle of the air horn, and squeezed on the trigger of his pistol. The first round hits Tom in the forehead at close range. Judy screams and turns toward her husband, and the second round hits her in the side of the head. Tobin stops squeezing the air horn. But when

he opens the aluminum chest and sees that there isn't much in it, he figures the rest of the loot is on board the *Spirochete.* He searches the boat. Nothing there. He realizes he's killed the geese that were supposed to deliver the golden eggs. But all is not lost. He knows or believes that he can complete the job himself. Right?"

Beth nodded, thought a moment, then said, "Or Tobin has another accomplice on the island."

"Indeed. Then killing the Gordons is no big deal."

We continued east through the passage, which is about four miles long and half a mile wide at its narrowest. It was definitely dark now—only an ink-black sea and a smoke-black sky. I could barely see the channel markers.

To our left I saw a few lights onshore and realized we were passing Greenport, where there was obviously some emergency generator lighting. I looked at Beth and reminded her, "As soon as we clear Shelter Island, it's going to get rough. We're low on gas, and at some point out in Gardiners Bay we will reach that legendary point of no return."

"Don't worry about that. We'll capsize long before then."

"That sounds like some idiotic thing I'd say."

She smiled at me, which was unexpected. Then she spread out a plastic-coated chart on the dashboard and said, "There's some tricky navigating coming up. You have to stay to the right of Long Beach Bar Lighthouse." Then she glanced toward the stern and let out a scream. I thought it must be a monster wave, and I looked back quickly over my shoulder.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing: A huge cabin cruiser—a Chris-Craft to be exact, the *Autumn Gold* to be specific—was no more than twenty feet off our tail on a collision course and gaining fast.

FREDRIC Tobin had outflanked us, and it looked as if we were going to be sunk.

Realizing we'd seen him, Mr. Tobin turned on his electric hailing horn and shouted, "You're dead!"

I pushed forward on the throttles, and the distance between us widened. He knew he couldn't overtake a Formula 303, even in these seas. He greeted us again with, "You're dead! You're dead!"

Beth had drawn her 9-mm Glock at some point, and she was crouched behind her chair, trying to steady her aim on the back of the seat. I thought she should be firing, but she wasn't.

I glanced back at the Chris-Craft. Captain Freddie was leaning out the window on the helm side of the deckhouse cabin, holding a rifle in his right hand and, I assume, steadying the helm with his left. His right shoulder was braced against the window frame.

I yelled to Beth, "Pop off a couple."

She called back, "I'm not supposed to fire until he fires."

"Shoot the damn gun!"

She did. I saw the windshield beside Tobin shatter. I also noticed that F. Tobin was no longer leaning out the window with his rifle. I called to Beth, "Good job!"

I kept glancing over my shoulder as I tried to control the Formula. All of a sudden Tobin popped up at the open window, and I saw his rifle flash. "Down!" I yelled. The rifle flashed three more times, and I heard a round thud into the dashboard; then my windshield shattered. Beth was returning the fire.

I knew we couldn't match the accuracy of his rifle, so I gave the engines full throttle, and we took off, crashing through the tops of the waves and away from the Chris-Craft.

Beth moved closer to where I stood at the wheel. I asked her, "How many rounds do you have left?"

She replied, "I have nine left in this magazine and a full magazine of fifteen in my pocket."

"Good enough." I glanced at her and said, "Nice shooting there."

She didn't reply.

I scanned the horizon. Even in the darkness I could see the two points of land on either side of us now. Within a minute we were out into Gardiners Bay. Within two minutes the sea looked like someone switched the dial to SPIN and RINSE. The wind howled, the waves crashed, and the boat was nearly out of control.

Beth yelled, "John! We have to turn back!"

I knew she was right. The Formula was not made for this, and neither was I. But in truth, I was no longer frightened by the sea or by the possibility of my death. I was running on pure adrenaline and hate. I shook my head. "Beth, we have to stay in the marked channel. If we lose sight of these channel markers, we're finished. We're on a narrow highway, and there's a guy with a rifle behind us, and the only way to go is straight."

She looked at me, and I could tell she didn't completely believe me. Then she said, "Tobin murdered Emma Whitestone right under your nose, and that was an attack on your manhood, an insult to your ego. That's what's driving you on. Right?"

No use lying, so I said, "That's part of it."

"What's the other part?"

"Well . . . I was falling in love with her."

Neither of us spoke for a while. I stood at the wheel, braced against the seat. The wind blew through the shattered glass in front of me, and the rain sliced in from all angles. The fuel was low. I was cold, wet, exhausted. Beth sat in the left seat, strangely silent, almost catatonic, staring straight ahead at each onrushing wave.

Finally she seemed to come alive and looked back over her shoulder. Without a word she got out of the chair and went to the rear of the boat. I glanced at her and saw her take up a kneeling position in the stern as she drew her 9-mm. Then, as the Formula rode up on a big wave, I could see the flybridge of the Chris-Craft behind us again, not more than sixty feet away and closing fast. I made a decision and cut the throttles back, leaving only enough power to control the boat. Beth heard the engines rev down and glanced back at me, then nodded in understanding. She turned toward the Chris-Craft and steadied her aim. We had to meet the beast.

Beth began a steady volley of fire at the dark figure at the window of the cabin. Tobin seemed to disappear from the cabin, and I wondered if he'd been hit. But then all of a sudden the Chris-Craft spotlight, mounted on the bow, went on, illuminating the Formula and Beth in the stern. Beth was slipping her last magazine into the

Glock, and Tobin was now back at the window, aiming the rifle with both hands.

I drew my .38, spun around, and jammed my back against the wheel to hold it as I tried to steady my aim. Tobin's rifle was pointing right at Beth from less than fifteen feet away.

For a half second it seemed as if everything was frozen—both boats, Beth, Tobin, me, and the sea itself. I fired. The barrel of Tobin's rifle swung toward me, and I saw the muzzle flash at about the same time that the Chris-Craft, with no hand on the helm, lurched to port, and Tobin's shot went wide. The Chris-Craft was now at right angles to the stern of the Formula, and I could see Tobin in the side window of the cabin. In fact, he saw me, and we made eye contact. I fired three more rounds into the cabin, and his side window shattered. When I looked again, he was gone.

I noticed now that trailing behind the Chris-Craft was the small Whaler. I had no doubt now that Tobin intended to use it to land on Plum Island.

The Chris-Craft bobbed around aimlessly, and I could tell there was no one at the helm. Just as I was wondering if I'd hit him, his bow came around very deliberately, and the spotlight again illuminated us. Beth fired at the light, and on the third shot it exploded in a shower of sparks and glass.

Tobin gunned the Chris-Craft's engines. He would have rammed us except that Beth pulled the flare pistol from her pocket and fired it at the windshield of the cabin cruiser's bridge. There was a blinding white explosion of phosphorus, and the Chris-Craft veered off.

The sea was so bad now I couldn't even see the channel markers for long periods at a time. I knew that Tobin, sitting high in his cabin bridge, had a better view of the markers and of us. As I thought about that, it suddenly struck me that he must have radar—ship-hazard radar, which was how he'd found us.

With increasing frequency a wave would break over the bow or sides, and I could feel the Formula getting heavier. The extra weight was slowing us up and burning more gas. The gas-gauge needle was in the red but not yet touching EMPTY.

I glanced at Beth, and our eyes met. She said, "In case we capsize or sink, I want to tell you now that I actually like you."

I smiled and replied, "I know that." I looked at her. "I'm sorry. I never should have—"

"Drive and shut up."

The only chance we had at this point was to gun the engines and see what happened. I pushed the throttles forward. The Formula moved out, slowly at first, then gathered some speed. We were taking on less water, but the boat was slamming hard and heavy into the oncoming waves.

I caught a glimpse of a flashing strobe light, and I knew that had to be the Orient Point Lighthouse. I estimated we were making about twenty knots, which was about one third of what this boat could do in a calm sea and without a bilge and cabin full of seawater. Beth said, "John, he's gaining on us."

I looked back and saw the vague outline of Tobin's boat as it crested a huge wave about forty feet behind us. In about five minutes or less he'd be able to place fairly accurate rifle fire on us, while my .38 and Beth's 9-mm pistol were really useless except for the occasional lucky shot. Beth asked me, "How many rounds do you have left?"

"Let's see. . . . The cylinder holds five. I shot four. So how many bullets does the copper have left in—"

"This is *not* a joke!"

"I'm trying to lighten the moment. How many rounds do you have left?"

"Nine."

"You only had two magazines?"

"*Only?* You're running around with a five-shot peashooter and not a single extra bullet on you, and you have the nerve—" She suddenly crouched behind the seat and pulled her pistol. She said, "I saw a muzzle flash."

I glanced back, and sure enough, there was Fearless Freddie in his shooting post. The muzzle flashed again. I realized there was only one thing left to do, and I did it. I cut the wheel hard left.

Beth called out, "What are you doing?"

"We're running for the Gut."

"John, we'll drown there!"

"It's either that, or Tobin picks us off with his rifle, or he rams and sinks us and laughs as he watches us go down."

She didn't reply.

The storm was coming in from the south, and as soon as I got my bow heading north, the boat picked up some speed. Within a minute I could see the outline of Plum Island to my right front. To my left front was the Orient Point Lighthouse. I aimed at a point between the light and the coast of Plum Island, right into Plum Gut.

At first Tobin followed, but as the waves got worse and as the wind blowing between both bodies of land got supersonic, we lost sight of him, and I guessed that he'd given up the chase. I was pretty sure I knew what he was going to do next, and I hoped I'd be alive in fifteen minutes to see if I was right.

We were smack in the middle of the Gut now. It was like a washing machine, with all kinds of debris being turned up from the seabed. There was no pretense of me controlling the boat any longer. I cut the throttles to idle, and the Formula was nothing more than another piece of flotsam and jetsam now. There were times when I realized we were literally airborne, and I think it was only the bilge water that kept us hull-side down. The idea of trying to get into Plum Island cove was almost laughable now that I saw what a horrendous place this was.

Beth managed to make her way toward me, and she wedged herself into my chair, behind me. She wrapped her legs and arms around me as I held on to the wheel for dear life. I hoped the physical contact gave her some comfort. I know it did for me. She spoke into my ear and said, "If we go in the water, hold me tight."

I nodded. I thought again of how Tobin had already killed five good people and was about to be the cause of two more dying. I couldn't believe that this little creep had actually caused all this death and misery.

Anyway, we were blown through the Gut like a spitball through

a straw. Ironically, I think it was the very ferocity of the storm that got us through okay. I mean, it sort of canceled out the usual treacherous swirling of the wind and the tides in the Gut.

We were in the Sound now, and the seas and wind were a little better. I revved up the engines and headed the boat east.

Beth was still behind me, holding on, but not as tight.

Off to our right was the dark shape of the old Plum Island Lighthouse. As we passed it, I could see a green dot sort of following us. I drew Beth's attention to it, and she said, "Night-seeing device. We're being watched by some of Mr. Stevens's men."

The wind was partly blocked by Plum Island, and the sea was just a bit calmer. We could hear the waves crashing up on the beach about a hundred yards away. Through the driving rain I could see a glow of lights, and I realized this was the security lighting of the main laboratory building. This meant the generators were still working, and this in turn meant that the air filters and scrubbers were still doing their job. It would have been really unfair if we'd survived the storm and died of anthrax.

Beth squeezed out of her nook and stood beside me. She asked me, "What do you think happened to Tobin?"

"I think he's coming around from the other direction. He's got to get on the leeward side if he's going to anchor and get onto the beach with that Whaler."

"Are we going to land on the island?"

"I hope so. I'll try to run up on the beach."

She said, "There are rocks and shoals along most of this beach."

"Well, pick a place where there aren't any rocks or shoals."

"I'll try."

The fuel gauge read EMPTY. I knew I should make my run to the beach now, before I ran out of fuel. But before I began my turn, the wind suddenly dropped, and I could see this incredible wall of towering clouds rising above us. More incredibly, I saw the night sky overhead, circled by these swirling walls of clouds, as if we were at the bottom of a well. Then I saw stars, which I never thought I'd see again.

Beth said, "The eye is passing over us. Go for it, John. You won't get another chance like this."

And she was right. I could see the breaking waves, so I could time them, and I could also see any rocks as well as shoaling waves.

I turned the Formula ninety degrees to starboard and pointed the bow at the distant beach. I looked into the rainy darkness, and silhouetted against the dark horizon was the Chris-Craft. It was relatively motionless, indicating that Tobin had at least two anchors out, bow and stern.

The waves smashing onto the sand were monstrous and getting louder as we got closer to the island. Finally I saw a huge wave forming behind us, and I threw the nearly swamped Formula into neutral. The boat pitched backward a little and caught the wave just below its mounting crest. I called out, "Hold on!"

The wave propelled us like a surfboard on its hanging crest with such force that the eight-thousand-pound Formula, filled with thousands more pounds of water, acted like a reed basket caught in a raging river. I had anticipated an amphibian-type landing, but this was going to be an airborne drop.

We came down, bow first, onto the wave-washed beach. The Formula rolled to the side, and we both jumped clear of the boat just as another wave came crashing in. I found a rock outcropping and wrapped my arm around it as my free hand found Beth's wrist. The wave broke and receded, and we stood and ran like hell for the higher ground.

We came to the face of an eroded bluff and scrambled up it. Somehow we got to the top and collapsed. Beth said, "Welcome to Plum Island."

"Thank you." We lay in the grass for a full minute. Then I sat up and looked down at the beach. The Formula was capsized, and I could see that its white hull was split open. I said to Beth, "I wouldn't want to be in that boat."

She replied, "No, and I also don't want to be on this island."

"Out of the fire," I said, "and into the frying pan."

"You bug me," she replied.

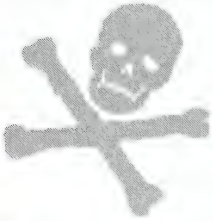
"There's an idea for a T-shirt," I suggested. " 'I got bugged on Plum Island.' Get it?"

"Would you mind shutting up for about five minutes?"

"Not at all."

In fact, I welcomed the relative silence. I could actually hear my heart thumping, the blood pounding in my ears, and my lung wheezing. I could also hear a little voice in my head saying, "Beware of little men with big rifles."

Chapter Ten



WE SAT in the grass sort of collecting ourselves and catching our breaths. We were wet, tired, cold, and banged up. I'd lost my shoes, and I noticed that Beth, too, was barefoot. On the positive side we were alive, and I still had my .38 in my shoulder holster. I drew the revolver and made sure the one remaining round was next in line to fire. Beth was patting her pockets and she announced, "Okay, got mine. Are you okay?"

I stood and felt very wobbly. "I'm fine." I reached down, and she took my hand and pulled herself to her feet.

Beth said, "I think we should head back in the direction of the Gut and find the main lab."

I didn't reply.

She continued. "We can't miss the lights. We'll get the Plum Island security force to help us. I'll put in a telephone call or radio call to my office."

Again I didn't reply.

She looked at me. "John?"

"You can go to the main building if you want. I'm going to find Tobin." I began walking east along the bluff, toward where we'd seen Tobin's boat anchored about a half mile farther down.

She didn't call after me, but a minute later she was walking beside me. We continued on in silence. The trees came right up to the eroded bluff, and the underbrush was thick. Without shoes we stepped gingerly and were not making good time.

The wind was calm in the eye of the storm, and the air was very still. I could actually hear birds chirping. Beth spoke to me in a sort of hushed tone and asked, "Do you have a plan?"

"Of course. The plan is to stay loose."

"Great plan."

"Right." The sky was darkening again, and I knew we'd soon be in the back end of the storm. I whispered to Beth, "This is about where Tobin anchored. Careful and quiet from here on."

Sure enough, about fifty yards offshore was the Chris-Craft, straining against the anchor lines. We could also see the Whaler on the beach below, so we knew Tobin had come ashore.

We remained motionless, listening and peering into the darkness. I was fairly certain Tobin had struck off for the interior of the island, and I whispered to Beth, "Wait here and cover me."

I climbed the fifteen feet down to the Whaler on the rocky beach. In the stern I found the plastic crate of odds and ends that I'd seen when the Whaler was in Tobin's boathouse. I noticed the air horn was gone. Tobin was ditching little pieces of the puzzle.

Anyway, I found a pair of pliers, and I pulled out the shear pin that held the propeller to the driveshaft. I also found a small fish scaling and fleshing knife in the crate, which I took. I looked for a flashlight, but there wasn't one on board the small boat.

I climbed back up the bluff. At the top Beth reached out and helped me. I said, "I took the shear pin out of the prop."

She nodded. "Good. Did you save it in case we need it later?"

"Yes. I swallowed it. How stupid do I look?"

"You don't *look* stupid. You do stupid things."

"That's part of my strategy." I gave her the pin and kept the knife.

We sat at the base of a fallen tree. I said, "Let's say Tobin's making his way toward where the treasure is hidden. We have to try to follow his trail and jump him as he's recovering the loot. Right?"

"No, John. Logic says we stay here. Tobin will be back here no matter what, and we'll be waiting for him."

"*You* can wait. I'm going to track him down."

"Stay here, John. There's safety in numbers." She added, "Get rational."

I ignored this and took her hand. I said, "Go down to the Whaler. Take cover among the rocks. When you can see him clearly in the dark, put the first round in his midsection, then move in fast and close and put a bullet in his head. Okay?"

She didn't reply for a few seconds; then she nodded. She smiled and said, "Then I say, 'Freeze! Police!' "

"Right. You're learning."

"Can I talk you out of this?"

"No." I stood, turned, and walked through the trees, away from the windy bluff and away from Beth.

I cut inland. Though the treasure may have been originally found near the beach, the Gordons most likely would have moved the loot out of the hole where they'd uncovered it, because the hole could easily collapse and they'd have to dig again. I found the dirt road that Paul Stevens's tour bus had taken to the east end of the island. Okay, I am Fredric Tobin now. I'm smart enough to know I should put a blaze mark of some kind on one of these trees to show me where I am on this road relative to my landing spot on the beach.

I looked around, and sure enough, I found a white length of cord tied between two trees about ten feet apart. It appeared that Tobin had gone almost due south. I struck out through the trees, trying to maintain that heading.

In truth, if I hadn't gotten lucky and hadn't found anything to indicate where Tobin had gone, I might have turned back and rejoined Beth. But I had this feeling that something was pulling me toward Fredric Tobin and Captain Kidd's treasure.

I soon found myself at the edge of a clearing. I could make out small buildings silhouetted against the dark horizon. I realized I was at the edge of the abandoned Fort Terry. I searched around for a marker and found a length of rope hanging from a tree. This was

Tobin's exit point from the woods, and it would be his entry point when he returned.

My feet were sore and bleeding, but all I could do was press on across the clearing, toward the fort.

I zigzagged from one building to another, looking for some sign of Tobin. After about ten minutes I found myself in the midst of hundreds of good hiding places among the abandoned buildings and nearby artillery bunkers covered with vines and brush.

I thought I heard something in the distance. I heard it again. It was a sharp, whiny noise, and I finally recognized it as a siren, barely audible over the wind and rain. It came from the west—a long, shrill sound, followed by a short blast, then a long sound again. This wasn't a fire signal or an ambulance or police-car siren. I knew—though I'd never heard this signal before—that I was listening to a warning siren for a biohazard leak. The backup generator must have died.

I decided to run back and get Beth, get on the Chris-Craft, and get away from Plum Island, hoping for the best. At least we'd have a chance, and the grim reaper could take care of Tobin for me.

As I hurried down the sloping road, I came to some realizations: I'd come too far to run away now, I had to find and kill Fredric Tobin, and I was a dead man anyway. Suddenly ashamed at my loss of nerve, I turned back toward the fortifications to meet my fate. The siren continued to wail.

As I approached the crest of the road, my eye caught a flash of light to my right. I headed that way and found a narrow brick lane that led through the vegetation. I could see that someone had been through there recently. I made my way through the tangle of fallen branches and finally came out into a sort of sunken courtyard, surrounded by concrete walls, in which were iron doors that led to the underground ammunition storage areas.

Drawing my revolver and moving cautiously into the courtyard, I began working my way in a counterclockwise direction around the perimeter. I came to the first of the big steel double doors in the concrete. They were closed. I continued on to the next door

and found it was slightly ajar. I peered in, but couldn't see or hear anything.

I pulled the door toward me a few more inches, and the hinges squeaked loudly. *Damn it.* I stood frozen and listened, but all I could hear was the wind and the rain and the faraway cry of the siren telling everyone that the unimaginable had happened.

I slipped through the opening and stood still, trying to sense what kind of place this was. I moved quietly to my left for two long paces and came into contact with a curved wall. I assumed I was in a tunnel such as the one we'd seen on our first trip here. I began walking in the pitch darkness, stepping high to avoid rubble or rats.

Hail Mary . . . My right foot stepped on something slippery, and I almost lost my balance. I felt around near my feet and finally figured out that it was a rail embedded in the concrete floor. I remembered that Stevens had said there had once been a narrow-gauge railroad that delivered munitions from the ships to the artillery batteries. Obviously, this was a rail tunnel that led to an ammunition storage room—*Mother of God . . .*

I continued on, keeping my foot in contact with the rail. It occurred to me that if Tobin thought he was alone, he'd have his light on, or at least he'd be treading noisily. Since I couldn't see or hear him, I made one of my famous deductions and deduced that he knew he wasn't alone—*pray for us sinners . . .*

I heard something, heard what seemed like water. It occurred to me that this tunnel might have cave-ins with this rain—*now, and at the hour . . .*

I kept walking, guided by the rail. The noise of falling water got louder, and the air got better. I had the sense that I was in a bigger space—the ammunition magazine. In fact, my eyes were drawn upward, and I could see a small piece of dark sky overhead. Rain fell through the hole. I could also make out a sort of scaffolding rising up to the hole, and I realized that this was the ammunition elevator where the shells were hoisted to the gun emplacements overhead. This, then, was the end of the line, and I knew that Tobin was here and that he was waiting for me—*of our death. Amen.*

FREDRIC TOBIN DIDN'T SEEM IN a hurry to announce his presence, and I waited, listening to the dripping rain. I could feel another presence in the room. An evil presence. Really.

Very slowly I pulled out the fleshing knife.

He knew, of course, that it was me, and I knew it was him and that he'd led me into this place that he intended to be my tomb. He also knew that as soon as he made a move or a sound or flipped on his flashlight, I'd fire. So we both stood frozen.

The cold was working its way through my feet and soaking into my arms, chest, and back. I felt a cough coming on, but fought it down.

Finally Tobin blinked, figuratively speaking; he tossed something against a far wall. It echoed in the huge room. It startled me but not enough to draw my fire. *Stupid trick, Freddie.*

We waited. I was sure he had a pistol. If he was carrying a rifle, he'd have tried to kill me out in the open from a safe distance. In any case, a rifle was no better in here than a pistol. What I didn't count on was a shotgun.

The roar of the shotgun blast was deafening in the enclosed room, and I nearly jumped out of my skin. But as soon as I realized I wasn't hit and as soon as my brain registered the direction of the blast—about ten feet to my right—I fired my single round right where I'd seen the muzzle flash.

I dropped my pistol and charged, lunging and slashing blindly to my front, but within a few seconds my knife scraped the wall. I stopped and stood frozen.

A voice, some distance behind me, said, "I guess you had only one shot left."

I turned slowly toward the voice of Fredric Tobin.

The voice said, "Speak to me."

I realized that each time he spoke, he had moved. Clever man.

Suddenly a light came on behind me, and I was caught in the beam of his flashlight. Tobin said, "Freeze, or I'll shoot. Freeze!"

So I stood there, my back to him, his flashlight and an unseen gun pointing at my back. He said, "Hands on your head."

I slipped the knife into my waistband and put my hands on my head, my back still to him. As I turned, I sucked in my gut and did a little jiggle so that the knife slid down into my tight jeans.

We were facing each other now about ten feet apart. He was holding the flashlight on my midsection, and I could make out an automatic pistol aimed along the beam of light.

Tobin played the flashlight over me from head to toe, and his beam paused on my shoulder holster. "Where's your gun?"

"I don't know. Let's look for it."

"Shut up."

I asked him, "Where's your shotgun?"

He said, "I cocked the hammer and flung it across the room. And you went for the bait. You're stupid."

"Hold on. It took you ten minutes standing in the dark with your finger up your nose to think of that. Who's stupid?"

"I'm getting tired of your sarcasm."

"Then shoot."

He didn't reply. Instead he said to me, "You figured out the part about the treasure, didn't you?"

"Why did you kill Emma?"

"Answer my question."

"You answer mine first."

He let a few seconds go by, then said, "She talked too much. But mainly it was my way of showing you how extremely displeased I was with your sarcasm and your meddling. Now you answer my question. Do you know about the treasure?"

"Yes. Captain Kidd's treasure. Here on Plum Island, to be moved to another location, discovered there, and so forth."

"Where is Beth Penrose?"

"She drowned."

"No, she didn't. Where is she?"

"Maybe she went to the main lab and called for reinforcements. By the way, I found the chest and bones and stuff in your basement under the wine boxes. I called the cops."

Tobin didn't reply. Any hope he had that his secrets might die

with me were now finished. I expected a bullet any second, but Tobin, ever the deal maker, asked me, "Do you want to go half?"

I almost laughed. "Half? The Gordons thought they were going halves and look what you did to them."

"They got what they deserved."

"How so?"

"They had an attack of conscience. Unforgivable. They wanted to turn over the treasure to the government. We'd get a finder's fee, and the rest would go into new lab equipment, a day-care center, and other worthwhile projects on Plum Island." Tobin paused a second, then said, "I told them I thought it was a wonderful idea. Of course, at that point they were as good as dead."

Poor Tom, poor Judy. I said, "So the Fredric Tobin Toddler Town didn't appeal to you?"

"Not one bit."

"What do you want, Tobin?"

"I want to know where the treasure is."

This sort of surprised me, and I replied, "I thought it was here."

"So did I. It was here in August, when the Gordons took me on a private archaeological tour of the island. It was right here in this room, buried under old ammunition crates. But it's not here any longer." He added, "There was a note."

"A note?"

"Yes. From the Gordons, saying they moved the treasure and if they had met an untimely end, then the treasure's location would never be rediscovered."

"So you screwed yourself. Good."

Tobin replied, "I can't believe they didn't share this secret with someone they trusted. Someone like you. Is that how you knew about Captain Kidd's treasure? Is that how you knew I was involved? Answer me, Corey."

"I figured everything out all by myself."

"Then you have no idea where the treasure is now?"

"I might have a small clue or two," I said. "They gave me some hints that didn't make any sense to me, but they might to you."

"Such as?"

"Well . . . Hey, how much do you think it's worth?"

He shone the flashlight on my chest and asked me, "Are you playing games with me, Mr. Corey?"

"Not me."

Tobin stayed silent awhile, torn between his burning desire to plug me right then and there and his faint hope that I might actually know something about what happened to the treasure.

Finally Tobin said, "It was incredible, really. Not only were there gold coins but also jewels. Jewels from the Great Mogul of India. Rubies and sapphires and pearls set in the most exquisite gold settings. And bags and bags of other precious stones. There must have been ten or twenty million dollars' worth of jewels, maybe more." He made a small sighing sound. "I think you know all of this."

As I suspected, the Gordons had apparently given Tobin the impression that John Corey, NYPD, knew something, and that was supposed to keep them alive, but it hadn't. I said to Tobin, "You knew who I was when I came to see you at the vineyard."

"Of course I did." He steadied his aim. "You're wasting my time. Do you know where the treasure is?"

"Freddie, forget the treasure. In fact, if you go outside and listen carefully, you'll hear the biohazard warning siren. There's been a leak. We all have to get to a hospital in the next few hours, or we'll be dead."

"You're lying."

"No, I'm not. Didn't you hear the siren?"

He stayed quiet for a long time, then said, "I guess it *is* over, one way or the other."

"Right. Let's make a deal."

"What sort of deal?"

"You give me the gun, we get out of here and get to your boat, quick, then to a hospital. We talk to the D.A. about your voluntary surrender, and you get out on bail. Then a year from now we go to trial and everyone has his or her chance to tell lies. Okay?"

Tobin stayed silent. He seemed to be contemplating this offer.

This is a tricky moment because he had to choose between fight, flight, or surrender. I kept in mind that Tobin was a lousy long-shot gambler, with an ego too big to cash in when he was down.

He said, "It occurs to me that you're not here as a law officer."

I was afraid he'd figure that out.

"You've taken all of this personally. You'd like to do to me what I did to Tom, Judy, the Murphys, and Emma."

Of course, he was dead right, and that made me dead anyway, so I dived left, into the dark, and shoulder-rolled across the floor. Tobin swung the flashlight and fired, but I was much farther across the floor than he'd judged. I got the knife out of my pants.

The narrow beam swung wildly around the room, and now and then he'd fire blindly. As long as the idiot kept the light on and kept firing, I knew where he was. I charged right toward him from behind like a linebacker. He heard me coming at the last second and swung toward me just as I collided with him.

He went down like a tenpin. No contest. I wrenched the pistol out of his hand easily enough, then pulled the flashlight from him. I knelt with my knees on his chest, one hand holding the flashlight in his face, the other hand holding my fleshing knife to his throat.

Tobin had trouble breathing but managed to say, "All right. . . . All right. . . . You win."

I heard myself screaming in the darkness, "You bashed her head in! You bastard!"

"No. . . . Oh, no."

I knew I was not rational anymore, and I should have gotten out of there. But those images of the dead were lurking in the darkness, and by this time, after the terror of the boat ride, the chase across Plum Island, the biohazard leak, and dodging bullets in the dark, John Corey had reverted to something best kept in the dark.

I reached with the fleshing knife and sliced through Tobin's pants into his lower abdomen—a deep, lateral incision.

Tobin screamed, and screamed again.

I stood, wiped my hands on my trousers, and walked away. Tobin's screams and cries echoed in the cold, cold room.

I LOOKED AT THE OPENING above. A dark, stormy sky never looked so inviting. I climbed the steel munitions elevator as Tobin's screams assailed me from below. You'd think a guy would run out of screams after a while. At the opening the rain was driving hard and horizontally. The storm had returned.

I saw now that the opening was surrounded by a circular artillery emplacement about thirty feet in diameter. The emplacement was cut into the hillside and was surrounded by a shoulder-high concrete wall that had once protected the big gun that sat here. I could hear the waves crashing on the shore nearby.

I was cold, shivering, thirsty, hungry, cut up, and I was feeling on top of the world. In fact, I let out a little whoop and yelled into the wind, "Alive! Alive!"

Then a little voice in my head said, "Not for long."

I stopped. "What?"

"Not for long."

It wasn't a voice in my head; it was behind me. I turned.

Up at the top of the five-foot-high wall, looking down on me, was a big figure, clad in dark rain gear with a hood, so that the face was barely visible, and the effect was sort of like the grim reaper—except the guy had a rifle. *Creepy.*

The guy just stood there staring down at me from about thirty feet away—an easy shot with the rifle. Maybe he meant me no harm. Maybe it was a Red Cross worker with brandy. *Right.* I said, "So, friend, what brings you out on a night like this?"

"You."

"Moi?"

"Yes, you. You and Fredric Tobin."

I recognized the voice now. "Well, Paul, I was just leaving."

"Yes," Mr. Stevens replied, "you *are* leaving."

I didn't like the way he said that. I assumed he was still ticked off about me decking him on his lawn. Life is funny sometimes.

He said, "Where's Tobin?"

"Right behind you."

Stevens actually glanced quickly behind him, then faced me

again. He said, "Two boats were spotted from the lighthouse—a Chris-Craft and a speedboat."

"Yeah, that was me in the speedboat. Just out for a spin." I asked, "How did you know the Chris-Craft was Tobin?"

"I know his boat. I've been expecting him."

"Why?"

"You know why." He added, "My motion sensors and microphones picked up at least two people at Fort Terry."

I said, "Do you know why Tobin and I are here?"

"Of course I do—Captain Kidd's treasure."

I said, "I can help you find the treasure."

"No, you can't. I have the treasure."

Oh, my. I said, "How did you—"

"Do you think I'm stupid? The Gordons thought I was stupid. I knew exactly what was going on with all this idiotic archaeological digging. I wasn't sure who their partner was until August, when Tobin arrived as a representative of the Peconic Historical Society."

"Good detective work. By the way, shouldn't you be wearing a mask or something?"

"Why?"

"*Why?* Isn't that the biohazard warning siren?"

"It is. It's a test. I ordered a test. Everyone who has hurricane duty on the island is in the lab, going through the drill."

"In other words, we're not all going to die?"

"No. Only you are going to die. You're a trespasser, and for all I know, a saboteur, a terrorist, and a murderer. Sorry I didn't recognize you." Stevens continued, "Bye-bye, bozo."

He steadied the rifle and drew a bead on me. A shot rang out, but there was no muzzle flash from his rifle and no searing pain shooting through my body. I saw Stevens fall forward, and he landed facedown on the concrete pavement. I heard that unmistakable pre–lights-out gurgle. He was basically a goner. I looked up at the top of the wall. Beth Penrose was staring down at Paul Stevens, her pistol trained on him.

I said, "How'd you get here?"

"I came looking for you. I spotted him and followed."

"Lucky for me."

"Not so for him," she replied. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. How about you?"

"I'm just fine. Where's Tobin?"

"He's . . . not here."

"Did you find the treasure?"

"No, but Stevens did."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I was about to ask him."

"No, John. He was about to put a bullet in you."

"Thank you for saving my life."

"You owe me a small favor for that."

"Right. So, that's it—case closed," I said.

"Except for the treasure. And Tobin. Where is he?"

"Oh, he's around here somewhere." I gave her an edited version of the confrontation in the ammunition storage room.

She said, "Shouldn't we get him medical attention?"

I replied, "Of course. First thing in the morning."

She didn't reply for a few seconds, then said simply, "Good."

WE SHELTERED from the storm in a concrete bunker. Before dawn we made our way back to the beach.

The storm had passed, and before the patrols came out, we replaced the shear pin and took the Whaler out to the Chris-Craft. I pulled the self-bailing plug in the Whaler and let it sink. Then we took Tobin's cabin cruiser to Greenport, where we called Max. He met us at the dock and drove us to police headquarters, where we showered and got into sweat suits and warm socks.

We had breakfast in Max's conference room and made a report to the chief. Max was amazed, angry, envious, relieved, and so forth. He kept saying, "Captain Kidd's treasure? Are you sure?"

During my second breakfast Max inquired, "So only Stevens knew the location of this treasure?"

I replied, "I think so. However, we know it exists, and we know

Stevens had it for a short period of time. So maybe with some luck the cops or the feds can find it."

Beth added, "That treasure has caused so many deaths that I really think it's cursed."

Max shrugged and replied, "Cursed or not, I'd like to find it—for historical reasons." He asked me, "Did I understand you to say that Tobin was dead?"

"Well . . . not the last time I saw him. . . . I guess I should have stressed that you need to get him some medical attention."

Max looked at me a moment, then inquired, "Where exactly is this underground room?"

I gave him directions as best I could, and Max quickly disappeared to make a phone call.

Beth and I looked at each other across the table. I said to her, "How can I repay you for saving my life?"

"How about a thousand dollars?"

"Is that what my life is worth?"

"Okay, five hundred."

The phone on the table rang, and I picked it up. I listened and said, "Okay, I'll tell her." I put the receiver down and said to Beth, "Your county limousine is here for you, madam."

She stood and said, "Call me in a month. Okay?"

"Yes, I will." But I knew I wouldn't.

I blew a kiss; she blew it back. Beth Penrose turned and left.

After a few minutes Max returned and said to me, "Spoke to Kenneth Gibbs, Stevens's assistant. The security guys already found their boss. Dead. Mr. Gibbs didn't seem all that upset."

"Never look too hard at an unexpected promotion."

"Yeah. Also, I told him about Tobin." He looked around the room and asked, "Where's Beth?"

"County PD came and took her away."

"Oh. Okay. . . . I just got a fax from the NYPD asking me to locate and watch you until they arrive about noon."

"Well, here I am."

"You gonna give me the slip?"

"No. Get me a ride to my house. I need stuff."

A uniformed officer drove me back to Uncle Harry's house. I got into nice duds that didn't say "Property of Southold Town PD" on them, and I got a beer and sat on the back porch, watching the sky clearing and the bay calming down. The lawn was a mess because of the storm, but the house was okay, though the electricity was still out and the beer was warm.

I suppose I should have waited for the NYPD, as I promised, but instead I called a taxi and went to the train station in Riverhead and took the train to Manhattan.

BACK in my apartment after all these months, I noticed thirty-six messages on my answering machine, the maximum it would hold.

My cleaning lady had stacked about ten pounds of mail on the kitchen table. Among the bills and junk was my final divorce decree, which I stuck to the refrigerator with a magnet.

I was about to give up on the mail when a plain white envelope caught my eye. It was hand-addressed, and the return address was that of the Gordons, though the postmark said Indiana.

I opened the envelope and took out three sheets of lined paper, each side of which was filled with neat script. I read:

> Dear John,
>
> If you're reading this, it means we're dead, so greetings from the grave.

I put down the letter, went to the fridge, and got a beer. I said, "Greetings from the land of the living dead."

I continued reading:

> Did you know that Captain Kidd's treasure was buried close by? Well, by now maybe you do. You're a smart man, and we'll bet you figured out some of this. If not, here's the story.

The letter was a detailed chronicle of the events that had to do with Kidd's treasure, Plum Island, and the Gordons' involvement with Fredric Tobin.

> Not long after we arrived on Long Island, we received an invitation from Fredric Tobin to attend a winetasting. We went to Tobin Vineyards for the event and met Fredric Tobin for the first time. Other invitations followed.

So began Fredric Tobin's seduction of the Gordons. At some point, according to the letter, Tobin showed them a rough map drawn on parchment but did not tell them how he'd come by it. The map was of "Pruym Eyland," complete with compass headings, paces, landmarks, and a big X. The remainder of that story was predictable.

The Gordons made it clear they didn't trust Tobin and that he was probably the cause of their deaths, even if it was made to look like an accident. Tom and Judy had finally come to understand Fredric Tobin, but it was too late. There was no mention of Paul Stevens, about whom they were totally clueless.

The letter ended with:

> We both like you and trust you very much, John, and we know you'll do everything you can to see that justice is done.
>
> Love,
> Tom and Judy

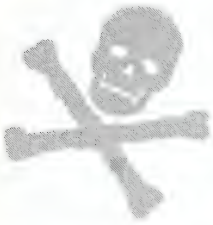
I put down the letter and stared at nothing for a long time.

If this letter had reached me sooner, the last week of my life would have been far different. Certainly Emma would still be alive, though I'd probably never have met her.

The doorbell rang. It was some clowns from internal affairs, who seemed annoyed with me for some reason. I went down to One Police Plaza with them to explain why I'd failed to return official phone calls and missed my appointment, not to mention my moonlighting as a Southold Township cop. My boss, Lieutenant Wolfe, was there, which was a pain, but my partner, Dom, was there, too, and we had a nice reunion and a few laughs.

Anyway, the bosses went through all the trouble I was in, so I called my lawyer and my Detective Endowment Association rep, and by evening we were close to a deal.

Chapter Eleven



A LIGHT snow fell on Tenth Avenue, and from the sixth floor I could see the flakes swirling through the streets below.

My class was filing into the room, but I didn't turn to look. It was the first class of the new semester, and I expected about thirty students, though I hadn't looked at the roster. The name of the course was Homicide Investigations. We would examine techniques of securing the crime scene, collecting evidence, working relationships with other specialists, plus interrogation techniques. In the last four sessions we would examine some notorious homicide cases. We would not examine the multiple homicides on the North Fork of Long Island.

The students in my course usually ranged from cop wannabes to visiting detectives on somebody else's nickel, uniformed cops who had their eye on the gold shield, plus, now and then, a defense lawyer who would learn from me how to get his clients found not guilty on a technicality.

Part of my deal with the NYPD was their cooperation regarding my three-quarter disability, the dropping of all contemplated charges against me, and the department's help in securing me a two-year contract at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. For my part, all I had to do was retire and make positive public statements about the NYPD and my superiors. I'm living up to my end. Every day, when I'm on the subway, I say aloud, "The New York Police Department is great. I love Lieutenant Wolfe."

The bell rang, and I moved from the window to the rostrum. I said, "Good evening. I'm John Corey, formerly a homicide detective with the NYPD." I babbled on a bit about the course and about grades and attendance and such. I said, "We'll also examine non-

scientific approaches to investigation, such as hunches, instinct—"

"Excuse me, Detective."

I looked up and saw a hand waving around in the last row. *Jeez.* At least wait until I finish my spiel. The female who owned the hand had positioned herself behind a huge guy, and all I could see was the hand. I said, "Yes?"

Beth Penrose stood, and I almost fell to the floor. She said, "Detective Corey, will you address the issues of lawful search and seizure, and suspects' rights regarding unlawful searches, and also how to get along with your partner without annoying him or her?"

The class laughed. I was not amused.

I cleared my throat and said, "I— Take a five-minute break in the classroom. I'll be right back." I left the room, walked down the hall to the water fountain, and took a needed drink.

Beth stood a few feet away and watched me. I straightened up and regarded her awhile. She was wearing tight jeans, hiking boots, and a plaid flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up and a few top buttons opened. This was more tomboyish than I would have expected.

Finally she said, "You never called me."

"No, I never did."

"Dom Fanelli has been keeping me up to date on you."

"Has he? I'll punch him in the nose when I see him."

"No, you won't. I like him. Too bad he's married."

"That's what *he* says. Are you enrolled in this class?"

"Sure am."

"And you come all the way in from . . ."

"Huntington. Takes less than two hours by car or by train." She asked me, "How about you? I mean, what are you doing besides teaching?"

"That's enough to do. Three day classes, one night class."

"Do you miss the job?"

"I guess . . . yeah. I miss the job, the guys I worked with, the sense of doing something. But I don't miss the bureaucracy. It was time to move on. How about you? Still gung ho?"

"Sure. I'm a hero. I'm a credit to the force and to my gender."

"I'm a credit to *my* gender."

"Only your gender thinks so." She laughed.

Obviously, she was having a better conversation than I was.

She switched subjects and said, "I heard you've been out to speak to the Suffolk D.A.'s office a few times."

"Yeah. They're still trying to sort out what happened." I added, "I'm being as helpful as I can considering my head injury, which has caused selective amnesia."

"Have you been out to the North Fork since—"

"No. I'll probably never go out there again. How about you?"

"I sort of fell in love with the place, and I bought a little weekend cottage in Cutchogue."

I wasn't sure where this was going, but I figured that Beth Penrose wasn't making a three- or four-hour commute every Wednesday night just to hear the master's words of wisdom. I, on the other hand, was just getting used to being unattached.

She said, "The Realtor told me your uncle's place was sold."

"Yeah. It sort of made me sad for some reason."

"Well, you can come visit me in Cutchogue any weekend."

I looked at her and said, "But I should call first."

She replied, "I'm alone. How about you?"

"Alone. But not lonely." I glanced at my watch.

She changed the subject and informed me, "My sources at the D.A.'s office said it's going to trial. No plea bargaining. They want a murder one conviction with the death penalty."

I nodded. I may not have mentioned this, but Fredric Tobin had survived. I knew I hadn't delivered a necessarily mortal wound. Subconsciously, I think, I couldn't commit murder, though if in my efforts to subdue him he'd died of shock or loss of blood, that would have been okay, too. As it stood now, he was sitting in an isolation cell in the county jail, contemplating either a life behind bars with Bubba or an electric jolt to his central nervous system.

Beth said, "I visited Emma Whitestone's grave, John."

I didn't reply.

"They buried her in this beautiful old cemetery among all

these other Whitestone graves. Some go back three hundred years."

Again I didn't reply.

Beth continued. "I only met her that one time, in your kitchen, but I liked her, and I felt I wanted to leave some flowers on her grave. You should do the same."

I nodded. I should have gone to the funeral, but I didn't. Couldn't. I noticed that a few of my students had gotten restless and wandered out into the hall. I said to Beth, "I should get back."

We walked down the hall together. She said, "I discovered there's a swimming pool in this building. Do you ever use it?"

"Sometimes."

"I'll bring my swimsuit next week. Okay?"

"Okay. . . . Beth?"

"Yes?"

"Well, is this going to be awkward?"

"No. But I expect an A in the course."

I smiled. "I can't be bribed."

"Wanna bet?"

We went into the classroom, me to the front, Beth to the back.

I said to the class, "We have another homicide detective with us, Detective Beth Penrose from the Suffolk County PD. Detective Penrose's name may be familiar to you from a recent and ongoing murder case on Long Island's North Fork." I added, "I worked with her on that case, and we each learned something from the other's distinctive style and techniques. Also, she saved my life, so to repay her, I'm taking her out for drinks after class."

Everyone applauded.

Homecoming
Belva Plain

The pleasure of your company
is cordially requested
at a family reunion.
Feuding is to be expected—
but so is reconciliation.
At least, that's the plan.

Chapter One

THE desktop was always covered with mail, incoming and outgoing. Appeals from charities, politicians—whether federal, state, or town—bills, and letters from scattered friends, all came flowing. Sometimes it seemed to Annette that the whole world made connection with her here and asked for response.

She picked up the pen to finish the last of the notes. Her precise backhand script lay between wide margins, the paper was as smooth as pressed linen, and the dark blue monogram was decorative without possessing too many curlicues. E-mail might be the way these days, but there was still nothing as satisfying to send or to receive as a well-written letter.

Having sealed the envelope, she placed it on top of the tidy pile of notes, sighed, "There, that's finished," and stood up to stretch. At eighty-five, even though your doctor said that you were physically ten years younger, you could expect to feel stiff after sitting so long. Actually, you could expect almost anything, she thought, knowing how to laugh at herself.

Old people were amusing to the young. Once, when she was less than ten years old, her mother had taken her to call on a woman who lived down the country road. It seemed, as most things did now, like yesterday.

"She's very old, at least ninety, Annette. She was a married woman with children when Lincoln was President."

That had meant nothing to Annette.

"My nephew took me out in his machine," the old woman had said. "We went all the way without a horse." Marveling, she had repeated, "Without a horse."

That had seemed ridiculous to Annette.

"So now it's my turn," she said aloud. "And yet inside I don't feel any different from the way I felt when I was twenty." She laughed. "I only look different."

There she was, between the library windows, her portrait framed in gilt, eternally blond and thirty years old, in a red velvet dress. Facing her and framed in matching gilt on the opposite wall was her husband, Lewis Martinson Byrne, wearing the same expression he had worn in life—alert, friendly, and faintly curious. Often when she was alone here, she spoke to him.

"Lewis, you would have been amused at what I saw today"—or saddened or angry. "Lewis, what do you think about it?"

He had been dead ten years, yet his presence was still in the house. It was the reason or the chief one, anyway, why she had never moved.

It had been a lively house, filled with the sounds of children, friends, and music, and it was lively still. Scouts had meetings in the converted barn, and nature-study classes were invited. Once, the place had been a farm and, after that, a country estate, one of the less lavish ones in a spacious landscape some two or three hours' drive from New York. They had bought it as soon as their growing prosperity had allowed. The grounds, hill, pond, and meadow were treasures and had already been promised after Annette's death to the town, to be kept as a green park forever. That had been Lewis's idea. Caring so much about plants and trees, he had built the greenhouse onto the kitchen wing. All their Christmas trees had been live, and now, when you looked beyond the meadow, you saw in a thriving grove fifty years' worth of Scotch pines and spruces.

Of course, it was all too big, but Annette loved it. Especially she loved this room, its walls covered with books—novels, biography, poetry, and history. The colors were many quiet shades of blue. Today, in winter, one dark red amaryllis flourished in an earthenware pot on the desk.

In the corner there was a large dog bed for the two King Charles spaniels. They had always kept spaniels. Roscoe, a gangly, homely mongrel with sorrowful eyes, had a mat of his own. He was completely dependent on Annette, who had found him deserted and hungry on a Caribbean beach. And she wondered whether, after having lived all these years in comfort, he had any memory of his past misery. She wondered about animals. She wondered, in fact, about everything. But she had better get moving with this pile of letters if they were to be picked up today.

The morning was mild—one of those calm, cold winter mornings without wind, when the pond lay still and lustrous as stainless steel. Soon, if this cold lasted, it would freeze over.

Wearing a heavy jacket and followed by the dogs, she went down the drive to the mailbox at the end.

Chapter Two

"I DIDN'T say I wouldn't go, Dad. I only said I didn't feel like going."

"Cynthia, I understand. Our hearts ache for you. You can't know how much."

Across the miles she heard his sigh and saw him seated in his wing chair, high above the Potomac, with the telephone in his hand and a view of the Jefferson Memorial before him.

Gran's note lay on her lap, written, of course, on the familiar paper that had accompanied every greeting and every birthday present going back to the year when Cynthia had learned to read.

"Come Saturday whenever it's convenient for you, spend the day with me, have dinner, and stay overnight. Stay as long as you like, if you've nothing you'd rather do."

Gran was wonderful, with her sweetness, humor, and old-fashioned foibles. But Cynthia was not in the mood for them. To pack an overnight bag, to sleep in a different bed, even these simple efforts were too much right now.

"Is Mother there?" she asked her father.

"No. She's at one of those charity teas. Your mother, the confirmed New Yorker, has made this move from the city with no trouble at all. It's taken me, the dollar-a-year man, a whole lot longer. Government is mighty different from the business world, let me tell you."

She understood that he was making conversation because he did not want to hang up the telephone, to lose that link. He wanted to have answers to questions that usually he was reluctant to ask.

Now he asked. "I hate to bring up the subject, but have you heard anything from Andrew?"

"No," she said bitterly. "Not since the last useless apology, and that's over a month ago, when I got my unlisted number. Apparently he hasn't gotten a lawyer yet. And my lawyer says we can't wait much longer to file for divorce."

"What's delaying him?" And when she did not reply, "The bastard! And I always liked him so much."

"I know. He was likable, wasn't he? More's the pity for me."

"Tell me, are you still seeing that . . . doctor?"

"The shrink, you mean? No. I gave it up last week. Frankly, I find that working on meals for the homeless does as much for me or maybe more."

"You're probably right."

Dad would think so. As a perfect exemplar of the work ethic, he disapproved of self-pity, weakness, and failure. Especially did he deplore a failed marriage. The Byrne family had never had a failed marriage. But he was always far too kind to say so.

"You may not think it, but this visit will do you good, Cindy. Your mother and I really want you to go. Will you?"

"What's the occasion? It's not Gran's birthday."

"She misses us. Simple as that. If you have time, pick up a box of those chocolate macaroons that she loves, will you? Your mother's bought a silk shawl for her, even if it's not her birthday. We'll take the shuttle early Friday. I'm afraid you'll have to rent a car. It's a pity you let Andrew keep the Jaguar."

"He's welcome to it. Who needs a car in New York? Anyway, he bought it; it was his money."

"Well. Well, all right, dear. We'll see you next Friday."

What was the use of arguing? It was easier to accede and go.

She sat there. Her limp hands lay in her lap. The fourth finger on the left one showed a band of white skin, as did the right hand, where the engagement diamond had once flashed. You would think that after four months skin would have darkened. And she kept sitting there looking at her hands.

"They should be photographed," Andrew had always said, "or even sculpted. You have classical hands."

He had thought she was beautiful. She knew that she was not. She was only slender, with plentiful dark hair and fine, clear skin. She was well groomed. Working as she did on the editorial board of a fashion magazine, she understood how to make the best of herself.

"You startled me," he told her on that first evening. "I didn't want to go to another boring cocktail party, but it was an obligation. And there you were, the first person I saw when I entered the room. I just stopped and stared. You were standing there in the middle of that jostling, chattering, overdressed crowd, tall and calm in your dark blue dress. Do you remember?"

She remembered everything. As usual she had been wearing dark blue. It had been her signature. Sophisticates in New York wore black, so she would wear dark blue—different, but not too different.

"You were twinkling," he always said, liking to repeat the story, "with that look you have when you are amused and too polite to let it show. It wasn't a superior look—it isn't like you to be superior—just faintly curious, as if you were wondering what the competition and all the nervous tension were about."

Curious. Grandpa Byrne had had that look.

"I love your poise," Andrew said, "the way you don't shriek out greetings with all that fake enthusiasm people have. I love the way you can sit with your hand in mine and keep silent until the very last note of the music dies."

He had the most wonderful face: a strong nose, a soft olive complexion, and, in contrast, light eyes—green, dark-lashed, and pensive. Remembering was unbearable now. What had been sweet was gall, bitter and angry.

She stood up and went to the window. New York with all its splendor was merely a jumble of towers and steeples this afternoon, a forbidding stone wilderness under the gloomy rain-soaked sky. If the rain had not been torrential, she would have gone outdoors and walked in it for miles, walked to exhaustion.

"What shall I do?" she asked aloud. "I am becoming a nuisance to myself and must not become a nuisance to other people."

Turning, she looked around the room, searching there as if, among the remnants of a life destroyed, she might somehow find a signpost, an explanation, or a direction. But the fruitwood chests, Persian rugs, and paintings of the Hudson River school with their round hills and snowfields, these tasteful possessions that befit the home of a rising young banker, all these had no explanation for the wreckage. None.

She walked down the hall. Past the bedroom where now she slept alone were the two closed doors; the people who came to clean this pair of rooms were instructed to close the doors when they were finished and to keep them so. Suddenly she needed to open them and look in. The rooms, except for color, pink in one and blue in the other, were mirror images; each had a crib, an adult-size rocking chair, a toy chest, and a row of stuffed animals on a shelf. Now the window shades were down, so that the light was dim, restful, and mournful, as in rooms where the dead lie. It was fitting.

Remember? Yes, remember it all from beginning to end.

"Twins," the doctor had said with a happy grin. People always seemed to smile at the subject of twins, as if having them was some-

how, in a nice way, comical, one of nature's jokes. Well, maybe it was, she had thought, going home. And thinking so, began to chuckle.

It was an energetic fall day, and she walked briskly. There were chrysanthemums in the florists' windows, and she bought a bunch of miniature whites. Then, at the bakery, she bought a box of chocolate chip cookies, which would be her last such indulgence until the twins would be born. At home, having arranged the flowers on the table, she laid out their wedding silver, lit candles, poured wine, and waited for Andrew. Working late at the magazine as she often did, she was not usually able to greet him at dinner with such a formal display.

Andrew cheered. "Great! Great! And so that's why you've begun to look like a baby elephant. To think, when I married you, my fingers were almost able to meet around your waist."

Kissing her lips, her neck, and her hands, telling her how happy he was and how blessed they were, he almost at once began to take charge of things.

"You are to go by taxi to and from work every day. I insist. Winter will be coming on, and the streets may be slippery."

"You're bossing me," she protested, not meaning it.

But he was serious. "Yes, and I shall keep doing it."

"I love your frown. It's so stern." She stroked the two vertical lines between his eyes. "I love your nice, level eyebrows and the way your hair keeps falling over the left side of your forehead. Why always the left side? And I love—"

"You silly woman. You could have found a really handsome guy if you had looked a little longer."

Plans were taking shape. Two cribs, blankets, a double carriage, and another entire layette, eventually another high chair and a double stroller, all these and more became the various grandparents' excuse to go back again to the infants' department.

Cynthia had always been gratefully aware of her good fortune. Going away to an Ivy League school, she felt in the first place lucky for being able to pass the entrance examinations and after that for being able to go without the financial pressures that bore so heavily

on so many other students. Coming home at vacation time, she saw keenly how comfortable and beautiful that home was.

And there were no impediments when she and Andrew came together. Their two families, being similar, blended easily; each was pleased with its child's choice. So in a traditional ceremony, with Cynthia wearing her mother's lace and carrying white roses, in a grand old Gothic church to the measures of a trumpet voluntary, they were married.

Then, with equal ease, they had planned for the arrival of their twins.

One day as spring approached, the doctor had more news. "You know what, Cynthia? You have a boy and a girl in there." He was an old man with an old man's forgivable twinkle. "You've planned it well, haven't you? That's the way to do it."

She was ecstatic. "I can't believe it. Are you sure?"

"Sure as can be."

Now there would have to be two extra bedrooms, since you wouldn't keep a boy and girl together forever. Her mind's eye, as she walked home through that warming afternoon, saw how the rooms might be decorated: cowboys in one, perhaps, and ballerinas in the other? No, too banal. As to names, both to begin with the same letter, as for instance in Janice and Jim? No, that was corny. How about Margaret, or just Daisy, which was what her mother was called, or perhaps Annette after Gran? Let Andrew choose the boy's name. There were so many lovely problems to be worked out.

This time she had a bunch of crimson tulips next to the wine cooler when Andrew came home.

"We'll need a pretty big place," he said. "Don't forget the nanny's room." Certainly, because she would be returning to work, there would have to be a nanny.

The remaining months were devoted to the new apartment. High on an upper floor from which you could see the park, this new home was one of the city's most coveted luxuries and maybe, thought Cynthia, a greater luxury than they should have undertaken. But Andrew thought otherwise.

"It's not out of line," he assured her. "Both of us are working and doing well. And even if you didn't work, we could manage. We'd just cut way down on something else. This is an investment, a permanent home for the four of us, or maybe more?"

THE birth, as predicted, went smoothly. Timothy and Laura, weighing together a total of nine and a half pounds, arrived on a breezy June day, conveniently, as Cynthia said, between four thirty and five, allowing their father and their already doting grandparents to celebrate at dinner. Obviously they were not identical twins, but they looked it, having Andrew's eyes, Cynthia's dimpled chin, and an unusual amount of her dark, lavish hair.

On the second morning they were brought to their pretty rooms and to the care of a good-natured nanny, Maria Luz, who had reared three babies of her own in Mexico. For the first few days there was a kind of pleasant confusion in the house as friends arrived to coo and marvel. But eventually the house grew quiet, order was established, and a routine emerged so smoothly that you might almost think Timothy and Laura had always lived there.

They were easy babies. They did a minimal amount of crying, soon slept through the night, gained weight on schedule, and sat up when they were supposed to. On Sunday afternoons in the park people turned their heads as the double carriage passed. And Cynthia, healthy and vigorous, with new clothes and a flat stomach, felt that she, that all of them, had been blessed.

"I never thought," Andrew said, "I'd be so foolish about my children. I always thought people who dragged snapshots out of their wallets without being asked were idiots. And now I do it myself."

The months went by. The first birthday came with a party, presents, paper hats, and smeared icing, all joyously recorded by the video camera. Sooner than you would imagine, the carriage was stored and a double stroller took its place. Laura and Tim were halfway through their second year.

And then into Cynthia's mind there had come a faint, unspoken shred of thought: Perhaps two were not enough. Perhaps it would

soon be time to think about another. Why not? She had just been given a nice raise. Life was so good.

IT FELT marvelous to be going home on a rare half day off, with the first whiff of winter in the air. Walking fast in her sneakers while swinging the bag that held her office shoes, she would get there in time to give the baths, or one bath at least, while Maria did the other. Tim was so active now that you had to wear a rubber apron or you'd be drenched.

When she reached the front entrance of her building, she was still smiling at the thought. Joseph, the doorman, did not smile back, which was unusual. He looked, actually, stern. Dismissing the matter, she went into the lobby. At the elevator her neighbor from the apartment across the hall came quickly forward on seeing her, and she, too, had a queer expression on her face, so queer that alarm ran down Cynthia's back.

"Cindy," the woman said.

Something had happened.

"Let's go up. They were looking for you, but—"

"What is it? What is it?"

"An accident. Cindy, oh, darling, you'll need to be—"

The elevator stopped, the door slid open, and a low thrum of many voices surged toward them. Crowding there were her parents; Andrew's parents and his brother; her best friend, Louise; their doctor, Raymond Marx, and—

"Where's Andrew?" she screamed, and ran, pushing them all aside.

He was bowed on the sofa with his face in his hands. Hearing her, he looked up, weeping.

"Andy?" she whispered.

"Cindy. Darling. An accident. There's been an accident. Oh, God."

And so she knew. She thought she was tasting blood in her mouth. "The babies?"

Somebody took her arm and sat her down beside Andrew. Dr. Marx was murmuring as he clasped hands tightly on her shoulders.

"There was a car, a taxi. Going around the corner, it jumped the curb."

"My babies?"

"It struck the stroller."

"Not my babies?"

"Oh, Cindy, Cindy . . ."

Those were the last words she remembered.

WHEN she awoke, she was in bed. Andrew, fully dressed, was lying across the foot of the bed, which was odd. When she stretched her arm out, the sleeve of her nightgown fell back, which was normal. Sunlight fell over the ceiling, and that was also normal.

Yet there was something different. Then it all flooded; great waves of anguish and disbelief broke over her. "No! It didn't happen! It's a crazy dream, isn't it? It's a lie, isn't it? Where are they? I have to see my babies."

Andrew, trying to take her into his arms, knelt beside the bed. But she was frantic; she pushed him away and ran to the door.

When it opened, a nurse in white came in with a bottle and tumbler in her hand.

"Take this," she said gently. "It will quiet you."

"I don't want to be quiet. I want my babies. Can't you hear me?" The cry was a howl. It shattered her own ears. I am going insane, she thought.

"You must take it, Mrs. Wills."

"Cynthia," her mother said, "darling, take the medicine. Please. Please. Get back to bed. The doctor said—"

"I want to look at them. They need me."

"Darling, you can't see them."

"Why? Why?"

"Oh, Cindy—"

"Then they're dead. That's it? Dead?"

"Oh, Cindy—"

"Who did it? Why? Oh, God, let me kill him too. Oh, God."

"Please. Think of Andrew. He needs you. You need each other."

Whether they gave her another pill or a hypodermic needle, she did not know. She knew only that the sunlight faded.

When she awoke, it was night. The lamps were lit. A few people were talking in low voices. Now she was alert enough to understand what they were saying.

The taxi—going, as witnesses said, much too fast—had smashed the stroller, which had just left the curb. The twins had died instantly. Poor Maria Luz, injured, had been taken to a hospital, treated for shock, and released. She was now staying with relatives. The children would be buried in the Byrne family plot in the country.

These were the facts. So it ended. The charmed life was over.

ON THE third morning Cynthia was awakened by the sound of hangers rattling in her closet.

"I'm looking for something she can wear. It will be cold."

That was her mother's voice.

"You'll have to ask her. I don't know," said Andrew.

"The doctor gives her too much stuff. She's half asleep all the time."

"Just till the funeral's over. No more after that, he said."

"Well, I suppose— Oh, there you are! Darling, I'm searching through your things for something black."

They were both in black, her mother in a correct black suit and Andy in the same. What sense did it make to care what one wore? The only appropriate thing was sackcloth and ashes, anyway.

"I never wear black," she said.

"Darling, navy blue will do very well. This wool dress, with a warm coat, will be fine. Shall I help you dress?"

"No. I'll be all right, Mom. Thanks."

"Then I'll leave you. Your father's arranged for the car."

"They've taken care of everything. They've been wonderful," Andrew said when Daisy left.

"Have they—I mean, are Tim and Laura—do we—"

"They're up there already. Oh, Cindy."

For long minutes they held on to each other. It was as if one or

the other, alone, would have fallen. When at last they straightened themselves, he fastened the back of her dress, she brought him an extra handkerchief, and they went out together.

In the limousine, silence held almost all the way, broken briefly when Cynthia's father gave directions to the driver. Andrew's right hand, joined with her left, rested on the seat between them. Once, she spoke.

"Does this seem real to you?"

In answer he shook his head. For her, reality kept flickering in through a dull sense of detachment that was equally terrifying. Was she about to lose her mind?

"We're almost there," her father said suddenly.

The car rounded a turn and passed a parking lot filled and overflowing onto the roadside. It stopped at a walk that overflowed with people. She wanted to flee, to hide from sympathetic eyes and soft murmured words. Yet it was very kind of all these people to be here. She understood what was expected of her. She was expected to take Andrew's arm, to walk in and go straight down toward the two little white caskets. And she did so.

An odd other and outer self that had been observing her for the last two days took note of the flowers that lay in wreaths and baskets and sheaves on the floor. They, like the sprays of lilies on the caskets, were white. For purity and innocence.

But Tim had not been innocent! He had been a rogue, a rascal who stole Laura's cookie right out of her hand and made her cry. Andrew was—no, had been—boastful about his boy. "Tim is one tough guy," he always says—no, used to say. One tough guy.

The other self was watching her carefully. It told her to remember everything because this was the last day she would ever touch them or touch, rather, the flowers and the smooth white lids. She leaned forward to put the tips of her fingers on the lids. The wood was smooth as satin and cold. The lily petals were cold too.

An organ was making soft, tentative sounds like whispers or footsteps in a room where a child is asleep. When it stopped, a rich, manly voice began to speak. The words were poetic and half famil-

iar, all about mercy and love. Prayers. Beautiful, gentle words. Well meaning. At her back there were crowd sounds—the light occasional coughs and tiny rustlings of polite, well-meaning people. She wondered when it was all going to be over.

And suddenly it was. The organ resumed its quiet song, men appeared to bear the little caskets away, and somebody said, "Come, Cynthia." Two by two, people moved toward the door, with Andrew and Cynthia in the lead.

Daylight burst into their faces. Following it eastward, they walked on the graveled path between last summer's stalks of dead brown grass and entered the burial ground.

Many generations of Byrnes and others among the forebears of Laura and Tim lay here in this old place. So many children were buried under these gray, time-ravaged headstones with their worn inscriptions. Molly, age three, now with the angels. Susannah, age two—a second-summer death, most likely the result of drinking unclean cow's milk after her mother weaned her. Ethan, age eighteen months and sixteen days. Eighteen months, thought Cynthia. Like mine. I must remember to count the days. But I can't think this minute, and there is no time.

For they had reached the hole in the ground, the hole with the green drapery that was meant to conceal the stony, clodded earth, which, considerately, would not be shoveled in until everyone had walked away.

The crowd had dwindled to relatives and intimates: Gran, with swollen, pink eyes; Andrew's people; cousin Ellen, who wept behind a handkerchief; the boss and staff from the magazine. All come to say good-bye to Laura and Tim.

Oh, my Tim, my Laura, you weren't here very long, but you will never be forgotten, not your smiles, your first teeth, your long eyelashes, your cries and red cheeks and fat hands—

"Amen," spoke the rich voice, and the circular gathering responded, "Amen."

Someone, Andrew's mother or her own or someone else, said quietly, "It's over, Cynthia."

Once more she took Andrew's hand. It was wet on the back where he had used it to wipe his eyes. The little crowd parted to let them proceed to their car. Low comments floated past them as they walked. "I heard it was the taxi's fault." "Remarkably brave." "Saddest thing I've ever seen." A woman looked into Cynthia's face as though she wanted to say something and didn't know how to say it.

At the end of the path they got into the car and went home the way they had come.

FOR a long time they held on to each other. No matter how their parents loved them and mourned with them, this agony was still Cynthia and Andrew's. They became very solitary. They took long walks in the snow, through the park where once they had so proudly wheeled their twins when the future was theirs and the world a field of flowers.

In the evenings they listened to music together. The apartment was completely quiet now. No more did they keep their ears open for a cry or a call. Only the great, solemn music broke the silence. Friends telephoned with tactful invitations to dinner or a movie; with equal tact they accepted refusal.

Once every week Cynthia and Andrew went for a counseling session. Everyone knew that was what you did when tragedy struck. Andrew was the first to stop going.

"It's only rubbing salt in the wound," he said. "Nobody needs to tell me that I have to get on with my life. Don't I know well enough that there'll be a line waiting for my job if I lose it?"

"What job? We don't need any job."

"We have to eat, Cindy."

"Do we? I don't know why. I'm never hungry, and I don't care where I live. I don't need anything."

"I know. But we can't kill ourselves."

"If it weren't for you, I would."

He sighed. "Don't say that, Cindy."

"Why not? It's true." She got up and began to pace the floor, from the window to the bookshelves and back again.

"I shouldn't have been working. I should have been taking care of my own children. I'll never forgive myself, never. I look at myself in the mirror, and I see guilt written on my forehead. Yes, believe it, in big red letters. G-U-I-L-T."

"Darling, that's foolish. It was a ghastly accident that could have happened to you or me or anybody."

"You know what? I'm going to quit the stupid job. That's what I'm going to do."

"I wouldn't do that so hastily. You've taken a long leave of absence, so wait till that's over and then decide. It's too soon after—after everything to make such a big change."

It was impossible to imagine going back to that office, receiving condolences and pitying looks, being chic, being with-it and brave. She would have to find something completely different, where there were no reminders, among people she had never seen before. Certainly she would find something else, but not yet. She was not ready.

She saw that Andrew was filled with pity for her. But then, her heart was broken over him too. He didn't pace the floor for relief of tension as she did. He did not, because no doubt he felt he must not. He was a man; men did not give way to grief. So they had been taught, poor souls.

At night they lay close with their arms around each other. When they needed to turn, they lay back to back, feeling the comfort of simple contact and wanting, in their despair, nothing more than to be one.

Then, after a while, Andrew began to feel the rise of desire, but she felt nothing. "I can't," she said. "Not yet." And he complied. It was incomprehensible to her that he could feel the need for pleasure. What pleasure could there be ever again? Inside of her there was a poison, corrosive as acid, a savage hatred for the man who had killed her children and was still alive to breathe the good air, a terrible rage at unjust suffering, rage at the world.

THERE came a time when Andrew did not willingly comply.

"How can you feel pleasure?" she cried.

"It's not just pleasure, as you put it. It is an act of love between you and me. We are still alive, you and I."

"How soon you have forgotten!" she exclaimed.

"Forgotten?" he repeated. "How can you think that about me?"

Then she apologized. "I didn't mean it as it sounds."

"It was pretty clear to me. A simple word."

"I'm sorry," she said again, and sighed. "It's just that I can't think of anything else. I see them in the stroller, their pink faces, their little hands in mittens, so precious, and in one second—"

"Don't, don't, Cindy. You have to stop this sometime," he pleaded.

He was not always so patient. "That doctor you're seeing doesn't seem to be doing you much good."

"No? He has only saved my sanity, that's all."

There was a pause before Andrew said, "Soon it will be six months."

Six months since we last made love, he meant. And that night, when he approached her, she did not turn away, but gave herself, lying like a stone, feeling nothing.

She did not fool him, and he told her so without reproach, only with sadness.

"I can't help it," she answered.

She intended her answer to be true, and although in a measure it was true, there was another measure by which she actually could have helped it but did not want to. How could they, how could Andrew, think that they would ever resume the life that had been before the tragedy destroyed it? Perhaps after all, men were different.

They began to drift. When he came upon her sitting one day at the window with her hands in her lap and her red eyes swollen, he upbraided her.

"Sooner or later you will have to stop crying. I don't know how to help you anymore. We can't go on like this. I can't."

His words and his tone offended her. "And you will have to stop threshing around all night," she cried. "I don't ever get a night's sleep. Speaking of wearing on somebody's nerves, do you realize that you're constantly cracking your knuckles? Every night we sit in

front of the television, and I have to hear the sound of your cracking bones."

They went to bed and lay far apart. An emotional storm was sweeping through Cynthia. For months she had been lethargic and numb; now instead there came these storms—panic and fear of confronting love or life, panic and fear of being shut out of life. She felt a terrible, inexpressible loneliness.

SHE knew she must get hold of herself. She knew that they had been living like hermits and that it was terribly wrong. So one day when a friendly couple, Ken and Jane Pierce, invited them to dinner at their country club, she accepted.

At the club there would be many people they knew, people from whom Cynthia had long retreated, and so for this first appearance she had considered her dress with special care. Is this the return of pride? she asked herself. Or is it the slow return of mental health as the doctor said it was?

In the mirrored hall at the club, she saw the reflection of a thin young woman with tired eyes wearing a flowered silk dress. She had bought the dress for a vacation they had never taken; they were to have gone to Florida with the babies.

"You look wonderful," someone told her, speaking with the kindness that is reserved for people who have been dreadfully ill and who do not look wonderful.

The tables were set outdoors on a broad terrace. Without interest she ate the food that was placed before her, as without interest she heard the chatter that passed over her head. Vaguely she knew that the women were discussing a hotly fought school board election. The men, talking business as usual, were mostly grouped at the other end of her table, while Andrew was between, with Ken on one side and an animated young woman wearing a red dress with a rather deep décolleté on the other.

It amused Cynthia a little to see how skillfully Andrew was managing to divide his attention. He always behaved so well and had such presence. And in spite of being wan and weary, he was the best-

looking man here tonight. She felt sad for him. He didn't deserve what had happened to them. They must, she must, somehow turn their minds away from it.

In front of Cynthia the golf course swept into the creeping dark, while to the left a wooded tract sloped gradually downhill. The day's heat still lay upon the grass and rose into the air, while overriding the hum of human voices was the clear, unending chirp of crickets.

We should have gotten out of the city long before now, she thought. It would have helped to go up to Gran's place and walk in the woods together. We must do that soon. There we might heal. We could be what we had always been.

And thinking so, her shoulders eased; she had not realized before how rigid they were. She looked out into the distant space where twilight had turned now to full night, cobalt blue except where Japanese paper lanterns drew their small gold circles on the darkness. How good it would be to stretch out and drowse beneath the trees. It was a long time since she had felt so sweet an urge. A curious peace had touched her, a country peace.

Andrew was laughing. It was so long, too, since she had heard him laugh. It was so long since she herself had seen anything in the world to laugh at. Had her behavior helped to drag him farther down? Yes, probably it had.

The woman next to him must have told a joke, because all the men were laughing. She was a pretty woman, but flashy, not Andrew's type, with that heavy makeup and that dress. Not that Cynthia had ever worried about other women—for they were *married*, she and Andrew, really married.

But I have been very ill, she thought. I have certainly given no care to how I look. I need to revive, to come back to life and open my arms to Andrew.

Tonight I will break down the barrier. Tonight.

A little wind rose now, swishing through the leaves, and she pulled her shawl around her shoulders. Pale yellow wool and softly fringed, it gave her a sense of femininity and grace that she had not

felt for too long. The sudden warmth within her was more than a warmth of the body; it was a lifting, a release.

And wanting to give him a look or a touch that would say, "Darling, it's going to be all right again. I'm sorry it's been so long, but really, really something's just happened to me and—"

She was stopped by a long wail from Andrew's neighbor.

"Do you know what I've done? I've lost my best bracelet! And it wasn't insured. Oh, I'm sick."

From all sides came advice and commiseration, while people searched in the grass and under the table.

"Where did you last see it? Think."

"Are you sure you wore it tonight?"

"How did you enter the clubhouse?"

"I parked the car myself in the far lot and walked up through the front door and the dining room."

"That's easy enough. Start at the car and retrace the whole way."

"I'll go with you," offered Andrew. "We'll begin right here in the dining room. It has to be somewhere."

"Oh, how sweet of you! Two pairs of eyes should surely find it."

The men returned to their conversations. The women talked about children, those learning to walk and those applying to colleges. And Cynthia, listening, was not devastated. It hurt, but not quite as deeply as such talk had been hurting. She was mending.

Twenty minutes went by. A few people were preparing to leave.

"Baby-sitters, you know."

"Have to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow."

"Where can your husband have gone?" Ken asked.

"I'm wondering where myself," she replied.

Cynthia went inside to look. There were only some youngsters dancing. From the front steps she had a clear view of the parking lots. That woman's red dress would be visible. She went back to the table. Fear, even as she knew how unreasonable it was, began to throb through her chest. He might have fallen somewhere or been suddenly taken ill. You never knew. The world was filled with unanticipated dangers. Who could be more aware of that than she was?

More time went by. "It's a puzzle," Ken said.

Jane moved restlessly. She had children at home, and there was an hour's drive ahead.

"It's fine for the people who live around here, but for us poor folk who stay in the city all summer—" She broke off. "Well, for Pete's sake, we've all been looking for you."

Andrew, with the owner of the lost bracelet, was walking out of the woods, she flourishing the bracelet and laughing.

"Guess what? It was on the seat of my car. I always take it off while I'm driving. The charms get in the way."

"But where on earth were you?" Cynthia heard Jane ask, and heard another woman adding under her breath, "Where do you think? It's only Phyllis's usual little disappearing act."

And Andrew, who had certainly heard, too, was standing like a bashful boy, startled by the sudden fall of silence.

Ken said quietly, "Let's go get the car. It's late."

"I need the ladies' room first," said Cynthia.

Jane followed her. "Don't let him see any tears. Don't give him the satisfaction," she counseled.

Cynthia, replying with some defiance, for a soft response really would surely have brought tears, said quietly, "You don't see any, do you?" And she bent toward the mirror, running a comb through and through her hair, which did not need combing. A terrible shame flushed her face; she had been publicly humiliated.

"That Phyllis can't keep her hands off a good-looking man. I don't know why anyone would want to invite her here; she's not a member."

"Oh, please—"

"All right, I'll say no more. Only, listen, Cynthia, you two have been through hell. Don't let this throw you back down. It's rotten, but it's not the worst. You just have to close your eyes sometimes."

It was unbearable. "We'd better go. They're waiting."

"If you're ready. Otherwise let them wait."

"I'm ready."

"Don't worry, you look fine."

"Do you know what? I don't care how I look."

Andrew and Ken, together in the front seat, talked their way back to the city, while the two women were silent, Jane out of consideration and Cynthia in turmoil. She was a pitied woman whose value had been cheapened in front of strangers. The armor of marital dignity had been stripped away from her.

All these feelings came rushing into words the moment the apartment door was closed. On shaking legs she stood leaning against the wall. "You were gone for three quarters of an hour from the time you were missed, and who knows how long before that. With that—that cheap thing that Jane said can't keep her hands off a man. And you—you made a fool out of yourself." She was maddened. She thumped her chest. "You did this to me? To me?"

"I didn't mean to make a fool out of you or myself. It's— You're exaggerating. It was harmless," Andrew said, stumbling over the word. "I meant, I didn't mean any harm. Foolish, I meant."

She stared at him. Never before had he, a man of confident pride, appeared so flustered, so inept.

"Foolish," he repeated, looking at Cynthia's shoes.

"What were you thinking of? What were you doing there?"

"We—it was—a walk. We took a little walk."

"I'm sure. It wasn't a little walk. It was a long one, unless—unless you spent a good part of it lying down."

"I admit I used poor judgment, but you're making too much of this, Cynthia. You're carrying it too far."

"Am I? I don't think so."

Everything about his posture spoke to her and drew a picture in her head. She threw her words at him. "You had sex with her."

"That's ridiculous. You have no grounds for thinking so."

"What else would you have been doing, discussing philosophy?"

"We were just talking. Talking about nothing in particular."

"Out in the dark bushes for almost an hour talking about nothing in particular. Do you think I'm an idiot? What's all this about, Andrew? I want to know. Don't lie; I want the truth. I can take it."

There was a silence. And then suddenly Andrew raised his head.

He looked straight back at Cynthia. "You said you wanted the truth. Well, what you feel— Well, you're right."

All her nerves jumped. One, at the corner of her temple, shot a single, dreadful pain, and she had to sit down.

"It's probably best that I admit it, that I tell you the worst. Then you'll believe me when I say that I've never done it before."

She began to sob. "I think I'm losing my mind."

He spoke humbly. "I never have done it, Cynthia, I promise. I must have been crazy tonight."

"Why? Why? Were you drunk? You're never drunk."

"I had a few glasses of wine, but I won't blame it on that. It simply happened. I'm so sorry, Cindy. I wish to God it hadn't."

"You bastard. What would you say if I had done it?"

"I would be furious. Frantic."

"No doubt. The mother of your children. Your dead children."

"It was crazy. I don't know how else to say it, Cindy. It was crazy. Because I love you."

She saw that his eyes were filled with tears. He moved to the chair as if to touch her hand or caress her head, asking pardon. She picked up her white evening purse and hurled it at him. She was inflamed, burning with outrage. The image of him lying on the grass—with whom? A glittering dress and a raucous laugh.

"I hate you!" she screamed. "After what we've been through, you can do this. After what we've been to each other—or so I thought."

"Cindy, please. Nothing's changed. I've done an awful thing. But can't you forgive an aberration, a crazy moment? I admit it was inexcusable. But you have been so cold to me."

"Cold! When my heart's been crushed! What sense are you making? Don't you hear yourself? No, you don't. You don't have the faintest idea of anything that—"

"And *my* heart? It's you who haven't the faintest idea of what it means to come together and comfort each other. I tried so. I tried all these months. I needed a little human warmth. That's all I needed." He stopped and wiped his eyes. "I'll keep trying if you will, Cindy. Please. I'm so sorry about everything."

An actor, he was. Walks back to the table nice as you please after he's dusted the grass from his trousers.

"I can't look at you," she said. "You sicken me. Go inside and get a pillow for yourself. You'll sleep here on the sofa."

"If it'll make you feel better tonight," he began.

"Tonight, you say? Don't bother counting the time until I let you back in any bed with me." Never. Oh, God, never. I'm looking at someone I don't recognize. I wish I were dead.

HE HAD wrecked everything. Just when they were starting to see light, he had turned the light off. How would she ever trust a human being again? The world that had once been decent and rational made no sense. Hatred solidified into a hard mass around her heart. She floundered among moods, among sobbing grief, fury, and despair.

"But I've apologized over and over," he kept saying all through those first awful days. "I tried to explain something that's probably unexplainable. I beg you, Cynthia. I beg you now."

"A wife sitting at the other end of the table, and a man calmly walks off into the bushes. No. Beg all you want. I'm deaf to it. I don't want to hear you or see you. In fact," she said one morning after another bitter session, "the sooner you leave here, the better. Let me alone. Leave now."

"You can't mean that, Cynthia."

"But I do. I'll give you a day. I'll give you till tomorrow. You can spend today packing your things. Then, as soon as the apartment can be disposed of, I will leave it too."

"You do mean it," Andrew said. And then his temper rose. "Then sit here and stew. Cry your eyes out instead of pulling yourself together. I've lost patience. I can't do any more."

SO IT ended. Now she was trying to make a new life for herself at work in a settlement house for homeless mothers and children. It was a joyless life but a useful one at least.

Again she went to the window, as if out there might lie some

answer to her questions. The sky was a dirty pink, the nighttime sky that hides the stars above great cities. It was time to leave this costly view and things that filled these rooms, the shining, pretty gadgets that once had been so joyfully assembled for a lifetime home. Gran's letter lay open on the desk. "Come . . . spend the day . . . and stay overnight. Stay as long as you like. . . . I love you."

Once more she read the loving words and imagined Gran at her desk writing them.

How could anyone refuse?

Chapter Three

IN WASHINGTON, Lewis Byrne put down the receiver and sat quite still, thinking about his daughter.

He had always, in the privacy of his thoughts, called her his gift of joy. Tall and calm as Cynthia was, he could see himself and his kin in her; piquant and graceful, she was also like her mother, having Daisy's quick wit and strong, athletic body. Repeated in Cynthia, these qualities seemed to have been intensified. As you watched her, you could imagine a bird in flight. A wounded bird now, he thought, and was heavy with that thought when the door opened and Daisy came home.

"How was it?" he inquired.

"Nice. I surprised myself by finding how many women I already know in Washington." She had brought a brisk air into the room, as if she had just returned from a swim or a horseback ride or tennis. There was energy in her stride and her direct blue gaze.

"I talked to Cynthia."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing, except she's going with us to Mother's."

"Oh, that's good. I was afraid she wouldn't."

"She loves my mother."

"Well, of course. What I meant was, having to go through the town, seeing the church where they were married and then the cemetery."

"How Andrew can have done this to her! After all they had been through, and just when we really thought she was beginning to recover." Lewis shook his head, sighing. "No matter how old your children are, it's never over, is it? Remember the shock we had when she broke her arm in three places? And when she was seven and got lost at the Brownie picnic—or we thought she was lost, anyway?"

"Remember when she was fifteen and madly in love with that awful boy?"

For a few minutes they were silent, until Daisy said gently, "Get up. Let's have dinner and go to a movie, a comedy if there is one. This sort of thing doesn't help either us or Cynthia."

"You're right. But I hate December," he said as he rose.

On a short, gloomy afternoon that call had come, rushing them to their daughter, to their dead grandchildren and the anguish.

"I know it's a bad month altogether. But come on, dear. Get your coat."

For Daisy's sake he must try. They had dinner, and it was good, but he was not hungry. The movie flickered before his eyes without registering.

Back at home, when she went to bed, he pleaded work. "I'll come in a little while. I've got to read some material on public housing."

In the chair by the window, he settled down again. The apartment must certainly be warm, he thought, since it always was, yet tonight it felt as if a chill were seeping through the walls. The Jefferson Memorial looked like a carving in ice and the world frozen. He got up, shivering, to pour a glass of wine. Perhaps it would not only warm him but put him to sleep. These days he always felt short of sleep.

Yes, December. I shall always hate the month. As if Cynthia's catastrophe were not enough, this week is the sixth anniversary of another death: On a Saturday night the firm of Byrne and Sons died. One of

the finest architectural engineering firms in the country came to an end. Smashed. Wiped out.

And at this recollection Lewis's hands shook, spilling the last few drops of wine on the unread public-housing report. A disaster like that must live forever in one's mind, he thought. He could still see the headlines in the newspapers, black letters dancing a crazy, evil dance:

CONCRETE BALCONIES IN THE NEW ARROW
HOTEL INTERNATIONAL COLLAPSE
EIGHTY-THREE KILLED AND MORE THAN SIX HUNDRED INJURED
RESCUE WORKERS FEAR MANY MORE TRAPPED INSIDE
TOLL MAY GO MUCH HIGHER

The horror. And Gene—my brother, my partner—still blames me. No forgiveness, no understanding, just blame.

That structure, that elegant, milk-white luminescence between the palm groves and the Atlantic, was to have been, if not the firm's crowning work, then at least another triumph in its list of successes from coast to coast. Arrow Hotels International had for the past twenty years engaged no other firm but Byrne to design their projects. And now the glory days were over.

It had all begun with that scruffy-looking kid, Lewis thought. He had an exact recollection of the morning when his secretary had announced that "some young fellow" was insisting upon seeing Mr. Byrne.

"Some kind of a nut, is he?"

"I don't think so, although you can't always tell, can you?"

Jerry Victor was his name. The matter was very important, of great concern to the firm, and a matter of conscience.

"All right, I'll see him and get it over with."

"That's not a bad idea. He looks like the type who'll keep coming until you do see him."

He was some sort of high-level clerk in the office of Harold Sprague and Company, the contractors. Deliberately untidy, with typically uncombed hair in a ponytail, he was well spoken, very earnest, and obviously educated. You could tell almost from his first

few words that he was also a crusader. Some people, and Lewis was one of them, would say at once that he was an agitator. Admittedly, Lewis was a conservative whose tolerance for what he called cranks was low. Nevertheless, he listened politely to what Victor had to tell.

Victor worked in a small space at the end of a narrow corridor between two offices. On a recent day sometime after working hours he had gone back to his desk to get some important keys that he had mislaid. Except for a cleaning crew the offices should have been vacant, so it surprised him to overhear two men in conversation across the passage. He was certain that one of them was Mr. Sprague. The voices were low, but the walls were thin. He could not help but overhear. He was, he said, not accustomed to eavesdropping, but he had been so shocked by the first few words that he had then concealed himself to hear the rest.

"Then eight percent, is it?" asked one man.

"Yes. Isn't that satisfactory?"

"We had talked of ten."

"That's a bit steep."

"You have to consider volume. We have two more jobs for you after this with Byrne. You'll find it worth your while."

"How about nine percent back? How does that sound?"

"Okay, okay. We'll compromise. You won't lose anything. There are more ways than one to mix concrete, right?" And someone laughed.

That, then, was the incredible story. Harold Sprague had been a friend at Yale and before that a friend at prep school. They had traveled in Europe together, and their families had been summertime neighbors in Maine. It was impossible to associate him with a dirty kickback scheme. This kid, this Jerry Victor, had most certainly not understood correctly and had probably not even heard correctly. Most likely he had some agenda of his own. He had perhaps been reprimanded and was seeking revenge, or he was simply a radical who wanted to undermine a company. So Lewis reasoned.

Or so he had reasoned then. Time and events had tempered that first certainty. Reflecting, he gazed out now upon the lights that dot-

ted the darkened Washington. No doubt, he could admit, he had been somewhat dazzled by the name of Sprague and should not have been. He winced as he recalled that day.

"This is a preposterous accusation!" he had said. "You didn't even see the men."

"I know Mr. Sprague's voice."

"Know his voice! No, young man, that's pretty flimsy evidence. I suggest you forget about it, do your job, and take care of yourself."

After admonishing and then dismissing the fellow with proper dignity, he had mentioned, as if it were a joke, the absurd affair to Gene.

"All the same, it should be looked into," Gene said.

"What? You can't be serious. Do you actually want me to insult Harold Sprague with rot like that?"

"When you come down to it, this is the first contracting job we've ever given him."

"We know his reputation up and down the West Coast. I wanted to give him a chance now that he's expanding in the East. His price was competitive, wasn't it?"

"We definitely ought to speak about this. I'll go if you feel uncomfortable about it."

"Gene, I forbid you from doing it."

Nevertheless, Gene did it.

"I was tactful," he reported a week or two later. "I said that I thought he should know there was a rumor—not that I believed it, just that he should know it. Of course he was indignant, furious. Oh, not at me. Don't worry."

"I think you've made a big mistake because of a disgruntled crank."

"I don't know about that. The kid came to see me a few days ago. He's been having a tough time, and he's leaving his job."

"Good riddance. He's an arrogant troublemaker. I've asked around and found that nobody likes him. He even stirred things up in the union."

"As to that, I don't know. But I do know that I can look at a man,

and most of the time I can tell whether he's an honorable, truthful human being or not. I believe that boy is."

"That's a doubtful statement, Gene. Think about it."

"No more doubtful than your belief in a man because you went to Yale together."

And so a slight distance grew between the brothers. It was nothing overt, rather a subtle coolness, as when a draft stirs the air in the corner of a room that is otherwise tight and warm. It was still remembered when, two years later, the grand hotel was finished.

And what a jewel it was! Here was grandeur without ostentation, which Lewis despised. When the lines were right, there was no need for fussy ornament.

Standing at the place where a blooming low hedge divided the lawn from the sand, he had looked beyond the great arch, all the way through the depth of the structure to the opposite arch and the alley of royal palms that stretched from the front entrance to the road. If you were standing at the front entrance, you would see only blue water and, at this moment, the black nighttime sky, in which mountainous clouds hid a few blinking stars.

It will rain soon, he had thought, probably all day tomorrow, too, and was glad for her sake that Daisy had not been able to come along this time. She had been at so many engineers' meetings, anyway. As for him, this one was rather special, since most of the members were having their first look at Byrne and Sons' achievement. He moved to go inside to the music, the champagne, and, frankly, to the congratulations.

A thunderous clap shook the air. Like lightning as it splits and fells a tree, striking unholy terror in animal or man, it crashed again. And instinctively Lewis ran for shelter. Then in an awesome fraction of a second as he reached the door, he saw not shelter, but chaos—and it was inside.

It struck his heart. He thought he was having a stroke. He thought he was dying.

Chaos was concrete boulders, contorted steel, and shattered glass lying at the bottom of the five-story atrium. The balconies had

fallen. Even now the last one on the second floor, struck by the one above, was giving way, and shrieking, flailing, tumbling human bodies were falling with it.

Now he knew he was dying, and wanted to die.

There was, among all who saw this, one long, audible intake of breath, then screams, sobs, and curses, and after that an instant, violent, impulsive rush to aid. Lewis pulled a girl from under a girder; she had lost an arm. Human beings, their heads barely visible beneath the rubble, cried and pleaded in terror while groups of two or three strained to move the debris that covered them. Lewis thought of his brother, but there was no time or way to look for him. There was scarcely any space in which to walk through the mass of ruins.

Water came gushing from broken pipes onto the slippery floor. An enormous chunk of concrete too heavy for human arms to shove lay over a pair of legs, and yet he tried. The man was screaming in his agony and begging; then suddenly his cries ceased, and Lewis walked away to steady an old woman who, though bloody, was able to stand. A child's face was torn; he had fallen onto the sharp end of something, most likely onto a piece of the delicate iron filigree that had adorned the balconies.

On one side of the lobby little tables were still set with cutlery, flowers, and pink cloths. On the other, in the cocktail lounge, the piano stood unscathed. Beyond it you could glimpse the Blue Room, where those victims who could be extricated from the destruction were already being laid on sofas and carpet.

Chambermaids, chefs in white, and men in maroon uniforms came running in from all over the hotel. Someone said, "Come here, grab her legs," and Lewis obeyed as they picked up a heavy woman who had fainted. People ran in from the street. It must be raining, he thought, for their clothes were streaming. Dazed, he moved from aid to aid, from place to place, through the turmoil of dust and splintered glass. In one vague moment he thought he was seeing the carnage of a battlefield. Only here in this place there had been music a few minutes ago and women in evening gowns.

The wail of an ambulance broke into his daze. Police, firemen,

and paramedics began to take charge. More help came. In the mirrored ballroom a temporary morgue was set up for the many dead. There was a frenzy of newsmen carrying cameras.

How many hours all this went on, Lewis was never able to recall. It seemed as if days must have passed until, pushed to the limit of shock and exhaustion, he had gone up to the suite that had been reserved for him and Gene.

The lobby had been cleared of the dead and injured. They had done all that they were able to do that day. What remained was the work of the hospitals. What he did recall perfectly, though, was the terrible quarrel with Gene.

Gene had opened a bottle of brandy. "Because we need it. That scene downstairs in the lobby— Hell couldn't possibly be worse."

Rain spattered on the balcony. A high wind had risen, clattering in the royal palms. It had blown the outer doors open.

"Some idiot didn't latch the doors," Lewis said. He got up and locked them. "I feel angry at the world, Gene. Things like this shouldn't happen. Music one minute and amputated legs the next. Listen to that wind. All we need is a hurricane."

Gene filled his glass and sat staring at the wall. Lewis stood at the window, trembling, staring at nothing. After a while, hearing Gene's mumble, he turned around.

"What are you saying?"

"Just mumbling. Trying to figure the count. How many do you think? Dead and injured altogether."

"I don't know. Too many, that's all I know. God almighty!" he cried. "How and why? Why?"

"I'll tell you. Because we should have taken action at the start when young Victor came with his story about Sprague. I suppose you see now that I was right two years ago. I hate having to say it, but it's the truth."

"You're jumping to conclusions. We don't even know yet what went wrong, and you've already fixed the blame for it."

"We know very well what went wrong. The concrete was no good. All you have to do is feel it. Cheap stuff. Not enough aggre-

gate. I searched as best I could in all the mess tonight, and I'll swear there weren't nearly enough iron bars for reinforcement either. We trusted. Or you're the one who trusted. Not I! And now we'll be blamed for the disaster. The fact is we deserve the blame."

"Well, if the supplier gypped Sprague and you're sure about the concrete, I don't see—"

"I'm sure. Go downstairs now and see for yourself. I never wanted Sprague, anyway," Gene muttered. "You know I didn't. And now we're through, finished, washed up. Do you understand?"

"You're jumping to conclusions, as I've already said, and you're drunk. That's brandy you're drinking, not water."

"I need to be drunk. Do you realize how many people died tonight? And how many may live who will never walk again on account of your stupidity?"

"How dare you!"

"I dare. Your fancy friend, heaven help us. Let's not offend him. Oh, no, never. No social conscience, that's your trouble."

"You're out of your head. I'm not going to let you get away with this when you sober up, brother or no brother."

So then we entered the prickly thickets of the law, thought Lewis now, a dark wilderness where we strayed for months and years, looking for some light beyond. It's all a matter of passing the buck, distributing the guilt. The supplier cheating the contractor—oh, yes, I admit Gene was right and the concrete was inferior. The contractor is an innocent victim, or else he is criminally negligent. The architect-engineers at the top of this pyramid have the same choice, as does the owning company. Victimized or responsible? Which is it? So they all sue each other. And the families of the dead and injured sue everyone in sight.

Then into the fracas steps Mr. Jerry Victor, a few years older now, with a respectable suit and haircut this time. And Lewis Byrne is called upon to explain himself in the courtroom, to give as best he can his foolish reason for not pursuing an inquiry. And Eugene Byrne must explain his part in the affair: how he did ask his brother to speak with Sprague and how his brother refused.

Thank heaven the business had finally come to an end.

Not, Lewis thought now, that it ever really will. Shall I ever stop seeing the terrible face of that girl with the bloody, mangled shoulder and missing arm? Was she dying, dead, or in shock when I pulled her out? I don't know enough about the human body to tell.

"What on earth are you mumbling about?" asked Daisy. "I was just falling asleep when I heard you. Come to bed. It's almost twelve."

"I was thinking of things. Of my rotten brother, for one."

"Honey, you've got to stop. He's not worth your thoughts."

"All right, I made a bad mistake. But he has no understanding, no mercy. Testifies against me. Accuses me of having no social conscience. Can you imagine? Me, a dollar-a-year man? While he's still raking in consulting fees?"

"Lewis, please. You get yourself so worked up."

She was pressed warmly against his back, with her arms around him, her lips moving on his neck. After all these years she could still give him everything he wanted. Yet tonight he was too filled with his distress to respond.

Feeling this, she withdrew, saying gently, "The last few years have been too tough. We're due now for some good years. I'm sure we are."

"Social conscience," he repeated as though she had not spoken. "That snob. He and his wife, Susan, the *Mayflower* descendant. Neither one of them ever got over that, did they? And look at the way he treated Ellen when she fell in love with Mark. Believe me, I'd choose Mark any day over our son-in-law, with all his fine family background. Even if Mark is Jewish. The things Ellen's told Cynthia about what they had to go through because of Gene! Good Lord."

"Come, come, for heaven's sake. You're out of breath. This isn't doing you any good or me either."

"I didn't tell you I saw Gene the last time we were in New York to visit Cynthia. I guess I didn't want to upset you. I saw him approaching me at the end of the block. It's a good thing I'm far-

sighted. It gave me time enough to cross the street and look into a shopwindow. I tell you, Daisy, the sight of him makes me boil."

"Then it's good that you don't have to see him. Let's try to do something about our Cynthia instead. We're going to have a good visit at your mother's. I always feel as if I've stepped back into an easier, slower age when we're there at your old home. The mahogany is cared for, there are flowers on the table, the dogs are brushed, old George still does the gardening, Jenny's still in the kitchen, and your mother's always cheerful."

At this Lewis did finally have to smile. "Yes, there's something about her that draws people. Jenny told me last time that she and George plan to stay as long as Mother lives." Then, frowning again, he exclaimed, "Poor Mother! She shouldn't have these family troubles at her age. I wonder— Do you think maybe she's asked us to come because there's something wrong with her? She's the last person to complain, but if there is anything wrong with her health, I'm glad it's me that she wants to see. She wouldn't get the same help from Gene."

"Darling, I'm sure there's nothing the matter. She simply wants to give Cynthia a little change. It's going to be lovely for the three of us. Come on to bed."

THE first thing Gene Byrne noticed when he came home from his office was the topmost envelope in the pile of mail on his desk. Anna, his dayworker, had known he would be interested first in his mother's letter.

Sitting down at once to read it, he had to smile. An invitation to spend the day and stay for dinner! It could just as well have been given over the telephone. But then, that would not have been like his mother.

"I would appreciate your not mentioning this to Ellen. I don't want to hurt her feelings. Do I have to tell you how I adore your Ellen and her babies? I do plan to have them come soon, but this time I'd like to have just you."

The indefatigable Annette Byrne is finally showing her age, he

thought. Young children, especially his darling granddaughter, Lucy, can wear even a young person's nerves out after a full day of their constant dartings, spillings, and questions. He understood that, and yet he was disappointed. Although his days were filled with welcome work, and although, living as he did in New York, he could have filled his evenings, and often did so, with drama and music, he had his lonely hours too. His life had changed when his daughter married, his son moved to London, and his wife died. He had to expect some lonely hours and had no right to complain. He never did complain. Still, he was disappointed.

Anna had put his dinner in the warming oven for him and, knowing his tastes, had set a place at the little table overlooking the East River. It was pleasant while eating to watch boats going by, pleasant to be snug here high above the windy streets. The embroidered place mat was initialed SJB, for Susan Jane Byrne, and was still in use even though it had been bought for her trousseau some thirty-two years ago.

Susan had left him much too soon. Cancer wasn't choosy about the ages of its victims. It would be ten years next week since he had taken up what they used to call bachelor quarters, directly after her death and Ellen's marriage, which had come a few months later. He often thought that if she had to die, she had at least been spared some unlooked-for troubles: the woeful marriage and the disaster of the grand hotel.

He himself tried not to think about those things. Fortunately, he was busy, unlike that brother of his, who had, he supposed from the little he heard, relapsed into idleness. One had to accept accomplished facts. Ellen's marriage, for instance, could have been much worse than it had seemed at the beginning. The children, of course, were wonderful. As to the other blot on his reasonably fortunate life, he knew that it could never be wiped out. He must simply not look back at it.

That would be difficult this anniversary week, however. Yesterday, coming home in a torrent of rain, he had had a total recall of the tropical storm that night, the dripping ponchos on the cops, the

shine of wet pavement where the ambulances were being loaded, the frenzied bustle, calling, shouting, and the clatter of helicopters overhead.

It should never have happened. It was, when you came down to it, simply a question of honor and truth. If only Lewis had listened to him when Jerry Victor came with his story, it never would have happened. But Lewis was too impressed with the Spragues to open his mouth and investigate.

No one will ever convince me, Gene thought now and probably for the thousandth time, that Victor wasn't telling the truth. It's not as if he was looking for trouble. He could have filed a complaint for violation of the whistle-blower law. He'd been promised a raise, and then all of a sudden it was denied. He'd been given some work that he'd never been taught to do and that he was bound to bungle. They wanted him to bungle it. He knew he was being prepared for a fall. Why didn't he sue? Because, as he said, he had a life to make. I admired him.

The funny thing is, if he had looked the way he looked in the courtroom a few years later, Lewis might have paid more attention to him.

He gets a lot of this snobbery from Daisy too. And who on earth does Daisy think she is? Her family never amounted to a hill of beans. Nobody ever heard of them. When I think of Susan, so unassuming, even though she was the closest we come in this country to an aristocrat, going back to the *Mayflower*—

Yes, but it's Daisy's daughter who made the good marriage, not ours. Life's little quirks. You never know what's around the corner. That was a terrible, unspeakable thing that happened to those twins. I was relieved to be in London when it happened; the funeral must have been awful. Ellen said it was. I can imagine. Or rather, I can't. Suppose it had been Lucy and Freddie. I think I'd go out of my mind.

They're so beautiful and so smart and so sweet. They look like Ellen. Not that Mark isn't a nice-looking young man. He dresses neatly, very well, in fact. Of course, you have to make a proper

appearance when you work in a fine midtown art gallery. I wonder how much he makes. It can't be much, I think, or why would they live in a remodeled loft way downtown instead of up here in this neighborhood, near the park, where Cynthia lives? It's so depressing downtown among those lofts and factories, so gray and grimy, with all the trucks and cluttered sidewalks. You feel as if the air is poisonous, and it probably is, from the exhausts, and no trees to absorb anything. Where in heaven's name are the children going to play? And whom are they going to meet?

But Ellen's apparently quite content, so maybe the choice is her idea. I don't know. She always was an independent. Like most artists. Maybe she'll actually make a name for herself someday after the children are both in school. I saw something rather good on the easel that she keeps on the north side of that big room. Good Lord, they cook and eat, she works, the children play, and they all do everything but sleep in that one room. Still, they're obviously happy together.

That elopement almost gave me a heart attack. Why, with all the contacts and opportunities she had, did she have to pick somebody named Mark Sachs? Not that I have anything against Jews. Well, maybe I do, a little. They're peculiar people. I never know what they're thinking. I don't feel at ease with them. It's just—it's just—Actually, though, it's not Mark whom I mind so much. No one could say fairly that Mark is not a gentleman. But his parents, especially his father! Never mind that he's a doctor and supposedly chief of some staff somewhere or other, I can't look at him. The one time I saw him, nine years ago, was more than enough. I never want to look at that black beard again. Sat there with a sour face; didn't eat anything. Ellen promised I wouldn't have to see him, and thank heaven she's kept her promise. I daresay the doctor isn't eager to see me either. Hah! It was mutual hatred at first sight, especially on his part. I sensed it the minute he walked into the room. The mother isn't quite as bad, except for her loud, whiny voice. Overemotional. Orthodox. Not pleased with my daughter. Not good enough for him. I can imagine how they must have ranted at home. To be

mixed up with people like those. And my grandchildren related to them, tied to them for life.

I'll bet he hasn't given them a cent, because he disapproves of the marriage. At least I've set up trusts for my family that they don't even know about. I'd like to give them things now, but they won't accept anything. Ellen doesn't want anything, and Mark's very independent. Well, I give him credit for that. So they'll get theirs when my time comes. Except for Susan's jewelry. Ellen already has it all, some handsome pieces, too, although goodness knows when she ever wears them. At least she has them. It wouldn't have hurt those people to make a gift to the mother of their grandchildren, even though they don't like her. Oh, well. As long as I never have to have any contact with them, and I won't. That's one thing you can be sure of.

Gene drank his coffee. Again his glance fell on his mother's letter. And again he wondered whether there was any reason for concern.

"Come early," she had written. "I'll expect you not later than ten."

Why specifically at ten? Unless she was expecting a conference of some kind with a doctor or lawyer, perhaps. It hurt him to think of her with either one, for doctors and lawyers almost always meant some kind of trouble. She had enough worries already: Cynthia's troubles and then the irreconcilable breach between her sons.

He got up and wrote a memorandum: "Stop at bookstore for Mother. New book on English castles, plus a good novel. Also, chocolate macaroons, large box."

ON THE other side of Central Park, Aaron Sachs and his wife, Brenda, were having their supper.

"We'll have to start early to pick up Mark and Ellen downtown before we get on the road," she said.

"Why they don't have a car, I'll never know. You'd think he could at least afford a cheap car."

"I'm sure he can. But what does anyone want with a car on Manhattan Island?"

"Right as usual, dear wife." And Aaron winked at her.

She was so reasonable that she sometimes, when he was in a bad mood, annoyed him. Still, after all these years she was his treasure, his "woman of valor," good-natured, vigorous, and almost as pretty as she had been on their wedding day.

At present he was not exactly in a bad mood, but he was tired. He had had some tough surgery and a sorry case that was bound to go wrong. Now this letter from Annette Byrne was a complication in his busy life. Who wanted to drive out into the country in the middle of winter to visit a woman one scarcely knew? They had been in her house only once before, and that was nine years ago. He picked up the letter.

" 'It would mean a great deal to me if you would all come,' she says, 'and it will be fun for Lucy and Freddie. We have a new family of swans to show them. So please do come.' Now, why should it mean a great deal to her? Why?"

"What's so puzzling? She's old and alone. She wants to have some time with her granddaughter and her granddaughter's family. I think it's very gracious of her to include us."

Aaron sighed. "I won't be able to eat the food, you know. It'll probably be baked ham."

Brenda laughed. "Of course it won't be. But whatever it is, we can eat vegetables. That's what we always do, isn't it? And we can do it again."

"They don't know how to eat, anyway. The food has no taste."

"That's why everybody goes to French restaurants. The food's so bad."

"I was only kidding, my literal wife." And they both laughed.

"She's a lovely woman, very simple in her manner, as I remember her. I have to admit, though, that I'm a little intimidated. I'm not used to grandeur. Not that the house is palatial, just the reverse. It has the kind of simplicity that costs a fortune, you know? And then the grounds, the gardens . . ."

"Anybody would think to hear you that you live in a hovel. Five rooms on Central Park West. Not too bad."

"I didn't say it was bad, idiot."

"Then act accordingly. You're an aristocrat, aren't you?"

"Some aristocrat."

"You grew up in a house in the suburbs, you went to a private school, and your grandparents were born in this country. I lived in Washington Heights with the rest of the refugees and borrowed the money for medical school. So by my standards you're an American aristocrat."

He loved to tease her. She was so earnest, so literal-minded, that he could always count on at least four or five seconds between the time she heard what he said and the time she realized that he was joking.

"Mark loves her, you know. He's mentioned her lots of times. She's very close to them. But the two sons haven't spoken to each other for years, Mark says. It must be a very difficult kind of balancing act for her."

"WASPs. They've no sense of family."

"That's ridiculous. You shouldn't use that word, anyway. A wasp is a mean insect."

"Well, Anglo-Saxons, then. I've nothing against them. Well, maybe I have. Some. They're a cold people. And stingy. They don't do a thing for their children once the children are grown and out of the house. I wonder whether her father knows about the pearls you gave Ellen and what we've set aside for the grandchildren. Living in one of their homes must be like living in an icebox. They don't express themselves. They walk around whispering politely, all buttoned up. No feeling."

"Nonsense, Aaron. You don't know anything about them. Those are ugly stereotypes; that's all they are."

"I know about people."

"No, you don't. You only know about people's broken bones. How can you talk like this when your own daughter-in-law is the sweetest soul on earth? And you know she is."

Brenda's fine dark eyebrows rose as, waiting for a response, she watched him. Yes, he did like Ellen. She was making his son happy. But how much different it would be if Mark had married somebody

from a family that could be joined to theirs. They'd celebrate the holidays together and feel at ease. What was he going to talk about up there at that fancy country estate? And he grumbled something inaudible to Brenda.

"You're tired," she said.

"I am not," he answered, never wanting to admit that he was.

"Yes, you are. I can tell by your grumble. You're tired, and this invitation has upset you besides."

"Well, it's made me think. It's brought back things that I've tried to bury. Why, Mark doesn't even go to the synagogue anymore. I asked him."

"Mark knows who he is. He discusses it freely. He's Jewish but secular."

"Secular! Where in blazes is the good in that?"

Brenda sighed. "Where the good is, I can't answer. But there's nothing you can do about it."

"I wonder what's going to happen to the children. Look at them. So beautiful."

In a double frame on the piano they sat: Freddie, not yet two, was holding a ball and, pleased with it, smiling, showing his tiny teeth. Lucy, just six, had light, ruffly hair and a ruffly dress; her smile was piquant, already feminine.

"They both look like my mother," Brenda said. "Take after her side."

"So beautiful," Aaron repeated, his eyes going moist. "Yes, but what's to become of them? What will they be?"

"I suppose Ellen's side thinks about it too. At any rate, there's nothing we can do about that either, Aaron."

For a few minutes neither spoke. The little table on which they had their meals had been placed at the window so that they might look down at the park. From this height the skating rink looked like a mirror speckled with moving black dots.

"Did I mention that Ellen's painting is going to be shown in one of those galleries near their apartment?"

"You told me." He knew she was making conversation. His mo-

rose humor, his dwelling on the old subject, were not fair to her. And forcing a bright tone, he said, "I think she has talent. Those landscapes she does are really pretty."

"That's just what's wrong with them. They're too pretty. They're only skillful imitations of Winslow Homer's country scenes. She even has a deer in the last one."

"Don't disparage it. I liked it."

"Darling, excuse me. You're a marvelous surgeon, but you really don't know the first thing about art."

Aaron waved his arm toward the farther wall, on which, above a grouping of stainless-steel-and-leather chairs, there hung an enormous painting of acid green and bloody purple tubes snaked around each other.

"And you do? And that's art? It looks like intestines."

"Aaron! It happens to be very very fine art."

"Bunk. You're reacting against a reaction. You like this abstract stuff because your parents ridiculed it." And he laughed, glad to have something to laugh about.

"Well, laugh away. It's good to see you being funny."

"Incidentally, how is it that you admire Annette Byrne's things? If you like the stuff in this room, you can't like her Chippendale."

"Well, I don't like Chippendale. But her things are good of their kind, and they're put together with taste."

Aaron nodded. "Listen, you don't have to persuade me to go. Save your energy. I'm going next week. I don't look forward to it, but I'll do it. Call up and tell her we'll be there."

"No, I'll write. When you receive a letter, you answer with a letter. That's proper. They're very proper people." And suddenly a dark expression passed across Brenda's face. "You know what? It's only the father who puts a bad taste in my mouth."

"You just met him once."

"Yes, and that was once too often. I felt such anger—the only time in my life I felt such anger. It stuck in my throat. I hated him."

"The feeling was mutual, you can be sure."

"Shriveled like a prune, his dry lips, and his eyes like pins pointed

into my eyes. Who does he think he is, the Duke of Westminster or somebody? The duke would be more gracious."

"Not if his daughter had run off and married our son."

They both laughed. Then Brenda said seriously, "Tell me. How does a girl like Ellen come from such a father? And how does a woman like Annette have such a son?"

"Who knows. Maybe it's in the genes. Don't ask me. I'm not a psychiatrist, or God either."

"Aaron, I just had a horrible thought. You don't think she'd have that man there, would she?"

"What man?"

"Ellen's father."

"Are you out of your mind? Of course she wouldn't. By the way, don't forget to pick up a little something to take along."

"I know. Mark told me what bakery to go to on the East Side. Annette likes chocolate macaroons."

A Chapter Four

AT FOUR o'clock in December the short, dark afternoon was over. Electric light filled the enormous room, glaring above the rug on which Freddie played with his blocks and Lucy, sprawled on her stomach, studied the first-grade reader. It shed a softer light on the easy chairs and bookshelves at the far end of the room, brightening the easel with the unfinished painting at the north window. And at the opposite end it brightened, too, the stove, the sink, and the ironing board where Ellen was at work.

Despite the short afternoon, it had been a long day. The days began around six o'clock when, from the other side of the partition that divided one space into three small sleeping rooms, there sounded Freddie's early stirrings in his crib. First came a chirping, part speech and part song. Next came the rattle and pounding of

the crib as he propelled it back and forth against the partition. Last came his demanding call for attention, meaning a diaper change and breakfast. There was no use in covering one's head with the blankets. It was time to get up.

"Rise and shine," Ellen's father used to say when it was time for school. And now that was her morning greeting to her own children. Funny, she reflected, how you trail all these tag ends along, even when you move from your first life into another one that's removed one hundred eighty degrees.

She still used her mother's linen place mats, even though she had to iron them herself. They were too precious to bring to the Laundromat, as were the handmade dresses that Gran bought for Lucy. Lucy had few occasions to wear them, but they were lovely. Ellen had worn such dresses herself when she was growing up in a long-ago time of children's concerts and Upper East Side birthday parties with crepe paper hats and loot bags to take home.

This was another world in which she lived now. It was hardly a world of poverty, but it was surely different. Here expenses mattered very much. You had to watch them, to make some careful calculations before spending anything at all. It bothered her father, who was always questioning, always offering to buy, to pay for this or that, and always meeting with refusal. Mark's parents did the same and, in the same way, met refusal.

For Ellen and Mark had need to prove themselves. When people marry each other in stubborn defiance of a hundred earnest objections and dire warnings of failure, they must go it alone. They must show—and always she had to smile at the old, trite, true slogan—that love conquers all. Well, of course, sometimes it did not. And she would think then of her poor cousin, Cynthia. But for Mark and herself, love had conquered.

And she looked over at her children. Born of love, they were blessed besides with intelligence and good looks. Their dinner was baking in the stove. Their father would soon be coming home. What more could anybody ask for?

Her ears, as evening approached, were always alert to the sound

of the rising elevator, which had once, when this building was a warehouse, carried freight and was slow. Mark's footsteps would rush through the outer hall; he seldom walked, but almost always ran to any of his destinations. She would open the door, and there he would be with his kiss, his smile, and his tie already torn off.

He was the kind of person who was most comfortable in jeans and sneakers. Anybody who knew him well would be amused to see him at work in that uptown gallery, wearing the fine dark suit and striped tie of a banker or Wall Street lawyer. But he loved the work, and as he said, "The clothes go with the territory." As it happened, he wore them very well. He was tall and slender, with a serious expression; he was cordial and serious, with a well-modulated voice. In a word, he was elegant.

Gran said that they made a handsome couple. Ellen knew it was true. She also was tall and had once been as blond as Lucy now was. She wore her tan hair with its few clever streaks in a ballerina's upsweep, revealing her long neck and graceful profile. On her various errands around the neighborhood—marketing, walking Lucy to and from school, and taking Freddie to play in the pocket-size park—she wore jeans, as almost everyone else did. Otherwise she wore simple clothes in vivid colors, for she loved color: aquamarine, apricot, and lapis lazuli. She wore little jewelry: inexpensive earrings that she bought in novelty shops, the plain wedding band that matched Mark's, and on appropriate occasions the splendid pearl necklace that his mother had given to her. It had been in essence a kind of peace offering from Brenda when Lucy was born. Ellen liked Brenda, who had, in spite of all, a fundamental tolerance and heart.

Her own mother's jewels, which had naturally come to her, were in a safe-deposit box at the bank. They were too formal and too precious to fit into Ellen's life as they had into Susan's. Lately she had come to think and speak of her mother as Susan; it made her seem young and filled with the happiness she must once have had before the long illness that filled Ellen's memory of her as Mother or Mom.

If Susan had lived long enough to see us married, Ellen thought, I would have asked her some questions. And I believe I know what she would have answered. Or maybe, given the pressure that Dad would have put on her, she would not have answered. Yet I do think she knew what was happening and simply did not have the physical strength to take a stand for me. I really sensed that, didn't I? And wasn't that why we waited, Mark and I, until she died? She had enough to bear without the addition of a social scandal, absurd and minor as it was.

After working hours or on a free Saturday that first year after her graduation from college, she used to tour the art galleries from the tail end of Manhattan to the treasure-houses of the Upper East Side. Sometimes she merely glanced into a window and, seeing nothing to tempt her, walked on. At other times, when tempted, she went in without any intention of buying, merely of satisfying her avid eye.

In particular she loved works that gave the feel of a quiet world without industry—a world of greenness and space, of domestic animals and crops and changing seasons. This nostalgia had probably to do with long childhood summers at Gran's house. No matter. And so it happened one spring day that she walked into a certain gallery on Fifty-seventh Street.

A very nice-looking young man came forward and addressed her. "May I show you anything?"

Ellen hated that. She had simply wanted to look, and she said so.

"Very well. I'll be happy to answer any questions you may have."

She walked around. The walls were hung with superb paintings, sparkling out of exquisite gold frames that in themselves cost more than Ellen could afford. At home they had expensive paintings, but they were not her taste. And anyway they belonged to her parents, not to her. Standing in front of a woodland brook under falling snow, she thought, Now, I would give my eyeteeth to own that—or better still, to be able to paint it.

There were two rooms. After she had slowly and carefully passed around all their walls, she returned to the brook and was still stand-

ing there, absorbed in the winter light and the stillness through which she seemed to be hearing the trickle of water over rocks, when a voice in back of her spoke.

"That really talks to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and I'm answering it," she said.

He laughed. It was a small, discreet laugh, professional sounding, as befitted his role. There was a dignity about him, a bit formal, a quality that she took to be British.

"Is there anything you would care to know about it?" he asked.

"Well, yes, the price," she said, which, having been a fine arts major and having recognized all the names on all these walls, she could easily estimate.

"It is thirty-five thousand dollars. An exceptionally fine example of his work. He died last year, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"His prices are bound to go up, so this is actually a remarkably good investment."

She did not reply. The young man had lovely eyes, extraordinary eyes—brown but almost gold around the pupils. Or perhaps it was the light slanting in from the street?

"Of course, I understand that you would only purchase a work like this out of love for it, but still, it is always nice to know that your investment will hold up."

He wanted so much to sell it! Naturally; they worked on commissions. The place was hardly busy either, and there were two other men standing and sitting, the latter idly turning the pages of the catalogue. It must be a difficult life, very frustrating.

"I'll think about it," she told him, aware that he must, hundreds of times, have heard the same words from people who were only looking.

For an indecisive moment they stood there; she saw his glance fall to her hand, to the dazzle of Kevin's four-carat round-cut diamond engagement ring. When he spoke, there was a touch of hope in his tone. After all, a young woman who owned such a ring—might she not also do more than just think about that snow falling in the

woodland brook? Bowing almost imperceptibly, he gave her his card.

"Mark Sachs," she read.

"Ellen Byrne. I'll think about it," she repeated. "And thank you so much."

She walked slowly home up Fifth Avenue, where there were no shops, only the summery park on the left, with its baby carriages, beautiful babies in fashionable strollers, and beautiful dogs being led by professional dog-walkers. On the right rose the limestone walls of apartment houses with green awnings and doormen in maroon uniforms. In one of these she still lived with her parents, there being no sense in setting up an apartment of her own when she was so soon to be married, anyway.

It occurred to her that most likely she would be spending her life in just such an apartment: spacious, quiet, and filled with valuable possessions in simple good taste. Her children would be reared as she had been, their little bedrooms above the side street. The important rooms—living room, library, and master bedroom—would face the park.

The master bedroom. The term had a masterful sound, almost patriarchal, when you thought about it. And thinking further, it seemed to fit Kevin, who was authoritarian, competent, and very kind as well.

On first meeting him, her father had observed, "That young man will go far."

He had already done so. Although not yet thirty, only four years out of law school, he had been offered a place in the firm's Paris office. At this moment he was in Paris getting some orientation, after which he would return. They would be married and go abroad to live for two or three years; then after that, following the usual track, he would return to the New York office and a promotion.

The prospect of living in France had thrown Ellen into a kind of adolescent rapture. Ever since having been there once with her parents, she had sustained a long love affair with France. She had also sustained a love affair with Kevin.

They had been casually introduced on the campus of the univer-

sity at which she was an undergraduate senior and he a graduate of its law school. He had come back that day on a visit. A group of five or six, Ellen's roommate among them, was on its way to the coffee shop, and she went along. Besides Kevin there was one other man, but he was uninteresting. It was Kevin, blue-eyed and bold of feature, who held attention.

He had already entered the world, that world which often, at worst, appeared like a dangerous jungle or, at best, like a game of musical chairs, where everyone scrambled, knowing that there were not enough seats to go around and that somebody was bound to be left out. Looking at Kevin, you felt almost certain that he would not be one of those left out.

Ellen had never expected to be noticed. She had indeed gone out a great deal with many differing types of men on the campus—fraternity men, athletes, and poetic loners—but they had all been her own age or close to it, so she gave a little well-hidden gasp of surprise when, under cover of some loud general conversation, Kevin asked for her telephone number.

Her roommate was equally surprised. Her quick, appraising glance at Ellen seemed to be saying, Why you? She was, however, in possession of some interesting facts about Kevin, which she gave to Ellen. He came from an Ohio family that had something to do with steel. In New York, where he lived alone, he had an apartment near the World Trade Center.

"He will probably never call you," the roommate predicted. "He's too full of himself to bother with an undergraduate. You're too young for him."

But he did call. When the telephone rang a few days later, it was to ask her when she would be back in the city. For Christmas vacation, she told him, and gave him her number there.

Her father noted with unusual approval that he did not "pick her up" in the lobby downstairs, but came straight to the apartment to introduce himself to her parents. "Which is what a man was always expected to do, you know."

Things moved with remarkable speed after that. On the first date

they went to a Broadway show. On the second they danced in the Rainbow Room. On the third they had dinner quite far downtown in one of the newest French restaurants that had gone to the top of the critics' list. The lights were hazy, the murals transported you to the shores of Brittany, and the tables were far enough apart for intimate conversations.

Ellen learned that he was already fluent in three languages and was trying to find time for the study of Mandarin—for China, whether we liked it or not, and he did not, was sure to become the dominant force on the planet. Kevin learned that she was hoping to get a wonderful position in a major museum of art somewhere, practically anywhere, because such jobs were hard to get. At any rate, she was bound to enter the world of art; she loved it ardently and, though really she had no talent to speak of, had even tried drawing and painting on the side. They had kindred interests and some acquaintances in common.

All these things in an odd, vague way made him less a stranger, so that when they could no longer keep sitting at the table—drinking wine, of which Ellen was not particularly fond because it made her sleepy, followed by coffee, which woke her up—when they positively had to leave to stand outdoors in a blast of icy wind and he suggested that they warm themselves in his apartment, it seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

In those years, she often thought after she was married, people had been amazingly casual about having sex. Quite simply, going to bed together after a few days' acquaintance was the expected thing to do, even if you did not especially want to do it. Ellen really did not want to; no one had moved her deeply, as you were supposed to be moved. She wondered whether possibly no one ever would.

Kevin was gentle yet not too gentle. He thought she was absolutely beautiful, absolutely wonderful, and told her so over and over. Then he took her home in a taxi, saw her to the door, kissed her, and the next day sent her a magnificent bouquet of two dozen roses.

You grow quickly attached to a person who glorifies you, provided, naturally, that the person is otherwise attractive. Back at col-

lege Kevin's nightly telephone calls gave her something to anticipate all day and something to look back upon with a sense of fulfillment. As often as possible she now went home for weekends, which was something she had never done before. Once, Kevin drove up for a weekend, and they spent a few hours at a motel, which was also something she had never done before.

She went through finals, did very well, and was graduated in May. She had invited Kevin because he said he wanted to come, so there he stood with her parents and Gran, among the crowd that saw her go past with the robed academic procession.

Later that week she was in Kevin's apartment, on the twenty-second floor, looking out at the view—the spread and sparkle across the Hudson, north to the bridge that spanned it, and south toward the tip of the island, where it met the bay.

"It seems," she murmured, "that in this city the first thing people want in an apartment, if they can afford it, is a view."

"That depends. This has been nice for me, but for the long pull I like the kind of place where you live, lower down and near the park, so our children could play there the way you did."

She turned about. This was the greatest moment in her life, she thought. Why didn't she cry or feel something incredible? She felt merely pleased, quite pleased. But it was, after all, no surprise. She threw her arms around him, and they kissed, a very long kiss.

"I take it the answer is yes. And with that in mind I came prepared. Here it is."

It, of course, was the brilliant ring, the family ring that had been kept for Kevin's bride. Now everything was sealed, sealed and soon to be signed. They would have to wait not quite a year until he would be established in Paris. In the meanwhile he would have to be traveling back and forth for the firm to other parts of Europe. And in the meanwhile there was great rejoicing. His parents arrived from Ohio, were invited to a celebration dinner in New York and to another one at Gran's place in the country. There were champagne and flowers; there were toasts. A lucky man, Kevin was. A lucky woman, Ellen was.

She was very well aware of all that on the day she walked home after the encounter in the gallery on Fifty-seventh Street.

Her mother was resting on the sofa in the library. Almost every afternoon during this past year she rested. And still, not wanting to admit the extent of her illness, she pretended surprise at herself. Her apology hurt Ellen's heart.

"I don't know what got over me today. The drowsy spring weather, I guess. Kevin phoned from Paris, dear. I told him you weren't home yet. He'll call back at five."

At five, precisely as always, the call arrived. "I'm missing you terribly," he said.

"And I you."

"What did you do today? Don't you get off early on Wednesdays?"

"Yes. But I took a walk afterward."

"Where did you go?"

Kevin had a habit of wanting detailed explanations for everything, which was sometimes bothersome to Ellen, but still, since he willingly gave such explanations for his activities, she really should not let it bother her.

"Went around looking into galleries."

"Did you see anything you liked?"

"Yes. For thirty-five thousand dollars."

"Well, I can't promise you anything in that range, darling. But I'll tell you, there's an art gallery in almost every fair-sized town in France, and they're not always too high priced either. Wait till you get here. You'll see a lot of landscapes, the kind you'll love. What's the weather like over there?"

"A wonderful spring afternoon, warm and soft."

"That's a perfect description of you. It's rained here all day, and it's still pouring tonight. What are you doing this very minute?"

"I was just emptying my handbag. It's full of junk."

"I was counting the minutes until five o'clock. Now I'm going to turn off the light. Big busy day tomorrow."

When she hung up, Ellen sat with the handbag on her lap, tossing things into the wastebasket: a worn-down lipstick, a torn hand-

kerchief, a piece of a candy-bar wrapper, and a card. MARK SACHS, it read under the name of the gallery.

Momentarily she felt a tiny pang of regret. Wouldn't the young man have been astounded if she had said, "Yes. I love it. I'll take it"? She would have enjoyed seeing his face, but that was absurd. She tore up the card and tossed it, too, into the basket.

TWO weeks later Ellen walked along Fifty-seventh Street carrying a pair of shoes that she had just bought. There in the gallery's window was "her" painting. Really lovely, she thought, and wondered whether, ridiculous as it was, she might try to paint something like it: a brook in falling snow, dark water, dark bare trees, the sky to be light gray, almost white—

"So you're still thinking about it?" And there was her salesman, coming through the door.

"No. I can't possibly. I said I'd think about it only because I wanted to make an easy exit."

He smiled. "People do that all the time. It's understandable."

"What I'm really thinking about is how I might try to paint something like it."

"You're an artist?"

"I don't dare say that. I'm a would-be artist."

"Even the greatest had to start."

There came then a pause with nothing to fill it, and she moved away from the window.

"Going east or west?" he asked.

"West to Fifth and then uptown."

"So am I."

They walked to the corner, waited at the red light, and turned north. She felt awkward and foolish to be keeping step with this total stranger and having nothing to say.

Mark Sachs was his name. She remembered how it had looked on the card—discreet and refined, almost like engraving.

"Nice to get through early," he said. "We're not all that busy this time of year. Nice to get some air."

"It's not too hot to walk, for a change. I'm going to get off the avenue and go through the park."

"So am I. Whenever I visit my parents on Central Park West, I like to cut through the park and out at the Natural History Museum. That gives me about a mile and a half's worth of exercise, anyway."

The dialogue was now slowly starting up.

"They've done wonders over at that museum. But my love is always art museums. I thought that after graduation I'd get a great job in one right away, but the great job hasn't turned up. They never tell you how hard it is to find one. So I'm working in the museum shop, which is fun, and I'm hoping it will—who knows—lead to something."

"I took my job the same way. I knew I wanted to do something in the art world. I didn't want to be a doctor or a lawyer or a teacher. Maybe if I'd grown up in the West, I'd be a sheep rancher. I don't know. So I got an M.B.A. with the thought that I'd eventually own an art gallery."

Some little boys were playing with toy boats at the pond. For a moment they stood watching.

"What would New York be without the park?" Ellen wondered aloud. "I played with boats right here. I actually grew up in this park. It feels like home, as if I owned it."

"Same with me, from roller skates to baseball."

"You must live right across from me. I'm near the art museum, and you're near the Natural History."

"No. I have an apartment in the Village with two friends from college. It's just my parents who live uptown. I try to visit them on Wednesdays."

"That's nice. I've been living at home since graduation last May because I . . ." And with a feeling that these explanations made to a stranger were really uncalled for, she stopped.

He looked at his watch. "Well, I'm early for dinner. They'll be surprised." Their paths were branching, yet he still was not walking away. "It's been nice talking to you."

"Yes," she said with a smile and, looking at her own watch, re-

marked, "yes, early for dinner, but there's nobody home to be surprised. They're in Maine."

"So you'll prop up a book while you eat alone? That's what I like to do."

This situation was absolutely ridiculous. Two strangers having a stilted, silly dialogue instead of going along on their ways.

"No," she said. "I missed the morning paper. I'll pick one up and read it in the sandwich shop."

"A sandwich? Is that all you're going to eat?"

"Oh, it's really much more than just a sandwich shop."

And still they stood there where the path forked. He seemed to be studying her face, then seemed about to speak, closed his mouth, and, at last, did speak. "Would you mind— I mean would you mind if I went along?"

Ellen had, then, a moment of doubt. Wasn't this, when you came down to it, nothing but a pickup? On the other hand, where was the harm? You might look at it as an hour's worth of adventure, a small, insignificant adventure, a little fun.

In front of the restaurant there were a few tables beneath an awning. When they had sat down and given their orders, they fell again into awkward silence until Ellen broke it, saying frankly, "I'm sorry I took so much of your time for nothing that day. You thought I was really going to buy it, didn't you?"

"You can always hope. And if people look . . . well, look as if—"

She laughed, interrupting him. "It's this ring. People see it and naturally assume things. I can't blame them, though I hate the idea."

"Then why do you wear it?"

"It's my engagement ring."

He seemed to be embarrassed, as if he had committed a social blunder, although, as she was well aware, it was she who had brought up the subject.

"He's working at his law firm's branch in Paris right now."

"So you'll be living in Paris."

"For a year or two. I'm hoping to learn things there that might add to my job résumé when I come back."

"I spent a year abroad while I was in college. Then I went there again for two summers and wrote an article about how architecture changed when Haussmann rebuilt the city."

"Was it published?"

"In a small, a very small, magazine. It didn't amount to much. Hardly original. But someday I'd like to do a book on how to remake a whole city the way Haussmann did."

She asked curiously, "Do you like what you're doing now?"

"I'm saving money for that art gallery and the book I want to do, so I have to like it. In the meantime I'm learning things. I'm out in the real world meeting people. Something interesting happens every day. Sometimes sad, sometimes funny."

Her glance met his eyes, in which she was startled to see again a lovely glint of gold around the iris. It was a lively glint, and yet if you were asked, you would say his eyes were thoughtful.

"What happened today? Something funny or sad?"

"I'll tell you, and you can tell me which it is. An old couple came in and walked around for a long time. They were country people, and this was their first trip to New York. He wanted to buy her a present. She said she'd like a picture to hang above the sofa. The one she liked was your snow on the brook. Good judgment. 'You like it, Mother?' he said, although quite obviously she was not his mother. And he asked the price. So I told him it was thirty-five. 'That's pretty steep,' he said, 'but since it's her birthday, she's entitled to it.' And he took out his wallet. 'Might as well pay cash.' I told the man very gently that there'd been a misunderstanding, that I should have explained he'd need to add some zeros. He was astonished. 'You mean you'd charge over a thousand dollars for that? Excuse me, sir, I don't mean to be impertinent, but that's highway robbery.' The poor lady was disappointed, and they went out still shaking their heads. So what do you think about that story?"

"It touches my heart. It's far more sad than funny."

"Of course it is."

For some reason the simple anecdote had moved her excessively. She had a curious awareness of sharpened senses: of the afternoon

sun's painful glitter on metal, of ice cubes squirming in her glass, of a passing woman's anxious face.

"Tell me a funny one," she said.

So, as if she had given a command, he did. He was a raconteur, an entertainer. The sun had gone behind the buildings across the avenue before they realized that it was late.

"You're really a humorist," she told him. "You're really a wit."

"Thank you. If I have any wit at all, I get what little I have from my father. Dinnertime was fun when I was a kid. It still is. Which reminds me, I'd better run."

Ellen went home thinking about Mark Sachs. He was an interesting person, so very alive. She had a feeling that he never wasted a living moment. Then another thought flew across her mind. What is he like when he makes love? She felt unspeakably foolish and, ashamed of her foolishness, crushed the thought at its birth. Who was he, anyway? She would never see him again.

ANOTHER Wednesday arrived. It was very hot, the kind of day when you think of doing nothing but being near water or, if that is not possible, of reading somewhere in the shade. The perfect spot in the park was the place where the walk forked toward the West Side. It was even breezy there and very quiet.

From time to time as people passed, Ellen glanced up over her book. Some boys came by on Rollerblades. Two nursemaids pushed baby carriages. Then suddenly there was Mark Sachs.

He sat down beside her and looked at her book. "French. You're preparing yourself. Are you leaving pretty soon?"

"The date's not been set, but soon. He— We have to find an apartment."

"My favorite place is the Place des Vosges."

"Expensive tastes!"

"Just idle talk. What's your choice?"

"That depends on how soon and how far Kevin moves up in the firm." And suddenly, conscious of an obligation, she said loyally, "He's very bright. Someone told me he's shot up like a rocket."

"So eventually you will afford the snowy brook or something like it."

"I told you I'm going to paint one of my own."

"Are you really any good? Seriously?"

Ellen shook her head. "I don't believe so, although once they hung something of mine in our church hall in the country."

He nodded, then said abruptly, "I'm Jewish. Orthodox. That is, my parents are."

"So? I'm an Episcopalian. What about it?"

"I don't know. I just like to set things straight, I suppose."

She wondered why he wanted to set things straight.

Now she pursued the subject. "That sounds interesting. Tell me about yourself," adding quickly, "if you want to."

"There's nothing much to tell."

"Oh, no. There always is. For instance, why aren't you Orthodox, like your parents?"

"Just never rubbed off on me. My father's a good man, sometimes hard to live with if you don't agree with him on certain things. He wanted me to be a surgeon too. He wanted it badly, so that's been a big disappointment to him, although he never says so anymore. He's evidently forced himself to accept me as I am. Mother accepts things more easily." Mark smiled. "Or at least she pretends to. She's a social worker, trained to unravel the knots and make peace. Anyway, her background is very different from Dad's. She's never had to struggle, and that's a big part of the difference."

This candor touched Ellen. It was not that he had revealed anything very intimate, but rather that he had responded so easily, so confidently, to a stranger. And suddenly, without plan, words came out of her mouth.

"I waited for you here today. I remembered you said you pass here on Wednesdays."

"I thought you did," he said.

This was not making any sense. Why had she admitted such a thing? The man would think she was pursuing him.

"I meant," she said to correct herself, "I come here anyway. It's a

favorite spot of mine. And then it crossed my mind that it would be such a funny coincidence if we were to meet here again."

He looked straight into her eyes. His own were smiling.

"Can we perhaps have dinner one evening?" he asked. "If that's an inappropriate question, please say so."

"Inappropriate?" she repeated.

"Yes. Because you are engaged."

"I go out with friends. Kevin doesn't mind. What does a dinner mean?"

"Well then, I'll call you."

When he left her, she sat looking after him. At the turn in the path he looked back at her, did not wave, and went on.

The sun had gone in, and the air was sultry. It was an effort to lift her feet as she walked home. A heavy tiredness overcame her. At home there was a message from her father on the answering machine: "Your mother's not feeling well. It's nothing acute, but we both think she'll be better off at home. We're driving back tomorrow."

The subliminal message was clear: Her mother's time was approaching. It had been long in coming and was no longer a shock, but perhaps a mercy. And yet when she passed her mother's photograph on the piano, she had to turn away.

The telephone rang, making an alien noise in the silent room.

"Where've you been?" Kevin asked. "I've made three tries in the last hour."

"In the park, reading."

"Poor girl. I know it's an awfully lonely time for you."

"Well, I have the job, and I read a lot." There seemed to be nothing else to say.

"You sound so distant, Ellen. What is it?"

"Mom's troubles have come back. Dad's bringing her home tomorrow."

"Oh, Lord, I'm sorry. But you knew that it was coming. You'll be brave. I'll help you any way I can."

"I know you will, Kevin."

"Now I have a bit of good news for you. I'm coming home for

Thanksgiving, and I'll be in the U.S. for two months, so we can be married and return to France together about the first of February."

"Yes, but if something happens to Mom?"

"We'll plan a quiet wedding whatever way things go. Just the family. Very simple. Actually, I like that better than a lot of fuss."

When they hung up, she began to cry. It wasn't only because of Mom. What was it? It was confusion. It was everything.

MARK and Ellen had dinner together. They went to a concert in the park and then to another. One rainy night they saw a movie, took a taxi to her door, and talked very seriously all the way about the movie. He seemed to have lost his humor and wit.

Her father was cheerful when she came in. Everybody was cheerful in Mom's presence these days.

"How was the picture?"

"Interesting. Very well done, I thought."

"Did your friend like it? Your friend— What's her name again?"

"Fran. She was in my class."

"Kevin phoned," her mother said. "I think he was a little annoyed when I told him you had gone to the movies. He had told you to expect his call."

"Oh, I'm sorry! I must have misunderstood." But she had not misunderstood; she had forgotten.

After her father left the room, her mother asked a strange question. "Are you happy, Ellen?"

"I'm fine, Mom. Or almost fine. I'll be really perfect when I see you feeling better again."

Her mother smiled faintly and was silent.

Ellen went to her room and got ready for bed. When she removed her ring, she laid it on the night table and stood looking at it. Her heart seemed to be shaking in her chest.

One day her mother said, "Our dentist saw you at the concert with a young man."

"Really? Yes, I was there with one of the women at the shop and her boyfriend. The three of us."

BY OCTOBER IT WAS ALMOST too chilly to meet in the park. When Mark came uptown on a Sunday afternoon, he was prepared with a heavy sweater and heavy shoes for a walk in the woods. Ellen was dressed the same way. This was the first time they had seen each other wearing anything but office clothes.

"You look so different," she cried.

"And so do you. More real. No, that's not quite what I meant. More natural, maybe? Except for the ring."

She flexed her hand and stared at it, saying slowly, "It's very beautiful . . . but I'd just as soon not have it."

"Then why have it?"

"Things happen. Sometimes you don't know why."

He was looking over her shoulder into the trees when he spoke. "Your parents like him."

"Very much."

"It isn't fair for you to be here. If I were engaged to marry a girl, I wouldn't want to know that she was meeting another man this Sunday afternoon in Central Park."

She only looked at him.

"Come here," he said, pulling her by the arm.

In the thicket that might have been miles away instead of a mere few yards from Fifth Avenue, they had their first kiss, a kiss that did not want to end.

THEY had to go somewhere, so the following week Mark took a room in a luxurious hotel, where, like any pair of tourists, they entered with their luggage.

"It's too expensive," Ellen protested. "You can't afford it."

"No, we deserve a beautiful place. You," he said, "you. I would die for you. Do you know that?"

They lay awake in each other's arms, not wanting to sleep, not wanting the night to end.

"I love you," he said.

There were tears in his eyes. Kevin had never been so moved, nor had she. This love and this lovemaking were entirely new. Different

people, she thought, and I never had any idea how different it might be. How could I have known? This man is like me in every way. We are the same.

Each week they changed hotels, and Ellen made excuses for her nights away from home.

"This won't do," Mark said. "I should go to your house and tell the truth."

"You can't do that. I'm still engaged. Anyway, my mother's too sick to go through what she'd have to go through with Dad. And what of your people? Will your father tear his clothes when he hears this? I've heard that they do."

"No," Mark said grimly. "But he'll feel like doing it."

"We couldn't help it, could we? When you're growing up, you always ask how people can tell whether it's the real thing or not. And no one is ever able to give you a satisfying answer. 'Oh, you'll know,' is all they say. But it's true. You do know."

On the first of November, Mark commented as they were walking that Thanksgiving was around the corner.

"Yes. I can't sleep for dreading it."

That evening her mother asked again, "Are you happy, Ellen?"

"You've asked me that before," she said gently.

"You wouldn't tell me if you weren't."

That's right, I wouldn't, Ellen thought. These are your last weeks, the doctors warned, perhaps your last days. I wonder whether you know it. If you do, you don't tell us either. We all want to spare one another.

WHEN Susan died, Kevin flew home for the funeral. Afterward and for the next few days the house was besieged with visitors and telephone calls. Toward the end of that hard week Kevin decided that Ellen needed some respite and must come with him to his apartment for a few hours' peace.

She thought, as he turned the key in the lock, that this was going to be the worst hour of her life. She had no idea of what she could possibly tell him that would not hurt him too much.

When he put his arms around her, she did not resist but stood stiffly with her own arms at her sides. Drawing a step back and with a puzzled, anxious frown, he said, "I don't understand. Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Yes, but—but there's been so much," she stammered. "It's so hard for me to talk, I—"

"I know. Your mother," he said gently.

There was a choking lump in her throat. Her glance went toward the window, toward black night and a scattering of lights.

"Not only that. I— Oh, Kevin, I don't know how to say it. I feel like a thief, a betrayer, a liar. This is nothing I ever dreamed would happen. But it did. It just did. I never wanted . . ."

He was staring at her. She saw him reach out to hold the back of a chair. And for a few moments they both stood facing each other in disbelief.

"Who is he, Ellen?"

"I met him one day this summer. He's a decent, good man, as you are. Neither one of us wanted to deceive or to hurt. We couldn't help it. That's the truth, the whole truth, I swear."

"And of course you have been sleeping with him while I was away, missing you."

She saw his hand grip the chair. White knuckles, that was the expression, and they really were white.

"I could call you names. I could say plenty of things, but I won't. You aren't worth the effort."

Now, many years later, that scene was still alive—its colors, sounds and silence still fresh—that scene and the others that followed it.

Kevin went back to France with the ring in his pocket. Through mutual friends she learned that he had taken the break very hard, yet no harder than her father had.

"Where's truth and honor, Ellen? My daughter, hiding away, lying, cheating on a good man. It's an incredible outrage."

"If you would only see Mark. It's not fair to condemn without seeing him," she said, not pleading, but with effort keeping her head high.

"I know enough without seeing him. You don't belong with him. That's all. For your own good I've asked you to reconsider, and you won't. You are a fool, a willful little fool, and I have no more to say to you."

The same drama had been played out at Mark's house. So Ellen packed her belongings, left a loving note for her father, and married Mark at city hall.

Eventually they all had to meet. It was Gran who, more than half a year later, had engineered the meeting in the guise of a wedding reception. A few elderly relatives and some of Gran's neighbors had been the buffers on the great lawn, which was so great that certain people—the two fathers—needed to have no contact with each other.

"Contact at glaring distance," Mark said.

Despite the summer day, the roses, and garden party punch, it had been really horrible. Only the elderly ladies, enthralled by the Romeo and Juliet occasion, had valiantly kept the conversational balloon from leaking all its air and shriveling onto the ground.

Mark's mother, Brenda, had been the first to soften, and for that Ellen would thank her forever. It was the birth of Lucy that finally had softened the two fathers enough to accept the marriage, as long as they never had to see each other.

By this time, Ellen thought as she put the ironing board away and got ready for dinner, the hatred can only be called pathological. Well, so be it, she was thinking when Mark came in.

"I'm starved," he said after he had put his briefcase down, kissed first Ellen and then the children. "What's this here?"

"An invitation from Gran. She wants us to come up next week and stay overnight."

Mark read aloud, " 'Don't mention this to your father, Ellen. I'm inviting Mark's parents too. Next time it will be your father's turn.' "

"Are my parents going?" he asked.

"Yes. We're to ride up together."

"We really should see your gran more often. She's a sweet old soul. I always think she must have been like you when she was young."

"When Freddie is older, it will be easier and we'll do it."

"Remember that wedding reception? What an ordeal! I came home in a sweat because of those two men. Nine years ago! I'll tell you right now, I couldn't go through it again." And he laughed at the recollection.

Chapter Five

ANNETTE had a habit that had taken root as long ago as her childhood. It was her custom, no matter what might have occurred during the day, to look ahead each night before falling asleep to something happy in the next day. More often than not the something was simple, such as a trip to browse in the local bookstore or an afternoon with an old friend. It might even be something quite trivial, like having pancakes and sausage for breakfast on a winter morning. Small comforts, she often thought, do help to soften large griefs, no matter what anyone says. Not, she would mentally add, that I am any great authority on grief. I have had very little of it: my husband's death and the deaths of poor Cynthia's twins.

This present sorrow could not possibly compare with those. Nevertheless, the breach between her sons had gone on far too long, and it hurt. Consider all those expressions fixed in the language, like blood brothers and brotherly love; those two men were too old and too intelligent to cast such precious bonds away.

Then there were other things that offended her sense of rightness: the impending and, in her opinion, entirely unnecessary divorce between Cynthia and her nice young husband was one. The in-laws' feud that burdened Ellen's household was another. What on earth was happening to people who should know better? Why couldn't they just behave themselves like adults? "Act your age!" she wanted to say to them.

But that was not so easy. In a brief, inspired moment she had

believed it might be and so had written those tricky invitations. Now, tomorrow morning, her chickens would be coming home to roost. And she was scared to death.

She stood now in the library talking to the portrait of Lewis. His keen brown eyes paid attention; on his left hand, resting upon an open book, the wedding band gleamed. For a moment she had an old, familiar impression that he was teasing her: "Oh, Annette, what a meddler and busybody you are."

"No, I'm not," she replied aloud. "If you were still here, you yourself would give your sons what for."

Two boys who played in the bathtub together. And she almost had to laugh at the memory of the day when, old enough to bathe themselves, they had let the water overflow. Loud shrieks had brought both parents running. A small lake was forming on the floor while the boys wrestled in the tub.

"He got soap in my eyes!"

"He punched me!"

By the time the slippery, protesting pair had been lifted out and pacified, both Lewis and she had been almost as wet as the boys. And how had it ended? They had all gone out for ice cream, as sweetly and happily as you please.

If only today's troubles could be so easily tidied away!

Cynthia. All these tragic divorces, instead of putting some effort into marriage.

"It wasn't all champagne and roses for us, was it, Lewis? And then those kids Ellen and Mark. Were they supposed to fall in love to please their parents? We didn't. You didn't have a bean when we were married, and I know my parents weren't delighted about it either, but they never said so."

When Annette's voice ceased, the room was too quiet. The dogs in their baskets slept deeply, the sleep of the old, she thought. They're old like me. I hope they won't outlive me, for who will take care of them? I wish I knew how long I have so I could make plans. People do live into their nineties these days, though. Still, you can't count on it. It seems as if you can't count on anything, although I

suppose it's age that makes me take that point of view. Age that makes me want to lecture to the young. And yet I'm afraid of them. What kind of a mess are we going to have here tomorrow?

It was then, as she sat down in front of the telephone, that she knew she must ask for help. To do otherwise was foolhardy.

Marian Lester lived halfway between the Byrne house and the high school, where she taught. Only in her late forties and looking ten years younger, she was an unusual person to be a friend of Annette Byrne's. But Annette had been active in community affairs, even on the board of education for many years after her grandchildren, let alone her children, were grown. And so they had had a long acquaintanceship. Then suddenly a friendship had begun.

One morning Annette was surprised to see Marian with the group of kindergarten children who were having their nature walk through Byrnes' woods.

"Don't tell me you're tired of teaching teenagers," Annette said.

"No way. But I'm on the board of our local wildlife committee, and they ran short of helpers for this morning's outing. So here I am, filling in. It's rather fun for a change."

Marian looked wistful, Annette thought. She had been a widow for several years and lived alone, her children being adults and far away. The little town was hardly overfull of desirable single men, and anyway schoolteachers had scant time to go out searching. Such a pretty woman too. It was a waste.

On impulse Annette suggested dinner.

"That is, if you have nothing better to do one night this week," she said with tact. "I know an old lady isn't the most exciting company."

Marian smiled. "That depends on who she is."

"Then what about tonight?"

"I'd love it, thank you."

They had a very pleasant evening, the first of many. They were both bookworms, music lovers, and nature lovers. They were passionate about causes. Like all women who are mothers, they had their own stories to relate.

There was an unusual serenity about Marian. At least it seemed

outwardly to be so. What was within, of course, one could not know. The thoughtful, listening expression and calm voice, even the smooth curve of the dark hair from the center parting to the ears, were all soothing to hear and look at. It seemed to Annette that Marian must never have had any of Cynthia's and Ellen's busyness—inherited, most probably, from me, she would think with a grin.

So they admired each other and exchanged the small favors that friends do. Marian knitted a handsome sweater for Annette, while Annette gave books and a matinee in the city. And they confided things, as friends do.

Therefore Marian knew all about the tangled quarrels in Annette's extended family. Therefore Annette was now at the telephone.

"I need your help, you see. I want to have things straightened out. It's ridiculous for these people to waste life like this." And then, as a doubt rose, she asked, "Tell me the truth. Am I wrong, Marian? Am I sticking my nose into other people's business?"

"Well, of course you are, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't do it. Some of the best things in the world happen because people stick their noses in."

"So you'll come? You can sit comfortably in the snuggery—that's my little office where I pay bills and read mail—you can read there. Then if you hear any loud argument, and I'm sure you will, come out and be a buffer."

"I'll be there early. It sounds interesting."

Hearing the smile in Marian's voice, Annette felt her dread recede. At least she would have an ally.

"Go to sleep, Annette, and think of something nice for tomorrow, the way you always do."

PROMPTLY at ten o'clock Gene's tires crunched over the gravel drive. From when he had first learned to tell time, he had always been either right on the dot or else five minutes early. His reliability had been a family byword ever since his childhood. Perhaps, Annette thought, this time I shall be able to reach that strong sense of what is required and right.

Coffee and his favorite cinnamon rolls were set on a tray in the sunroom, where he liked to sit on a wicker garden chair among flowering plants.

"You've had the chairs painted," he observed the minute he walked in.

"I thought white would be a nice change. Do you like it?"

"Very nice. You've never lost your touch with African violets, I see. It looks like summer in here."

"The light's good. That's all you need, no particular skill."

"You'd never think it was twenty-five degrees above outside."

"I got a feel of it when I let the dogs out."

"Old Roscoe keeps going, doesn't he?"

"Yes. He's in fine shape. Look at him. He loves the sun."

Gene looked at the dog, who was bathing in a pool of heat beside Annette's chair. He looked at his mother, who was also in fine shape for her age, slender and beautifully groomed, from polished shoes and pale blue country woolens to wavy white hair. Then he looked at the tray with its two cups and two plates. So she was not expecting anyone to join them, he reasoned, and was relieved of his earlier vision of doctors or lawyers come to discuss alarming news.

"I've been rummaging around in the attic," she said. "It's amazing how things accumulate almost before you know it. And I found some surprises. You know, I thought we'd given your trains away years ago, but here they are, in perfect condition, each piece wrapped in tissue paper. Your father must have done it. There's a huge layout—do you remember?—bridges, tunnels, a river, villages, and trees. It will be a real treasure for Freddie in a couple of years."

"It certainly will be," Gene agreed, although where his daughter's family would put the huge layout in that place where they were living was surely a puzzle.

He wondered about this conversation, too, and why he had been invited just today. Invited? Was not summoned perhaps a better word? For the letter, when he thought about it, was in a way rather strange. Again, why just today? And be prepared, if possible, to stay overnight? It would have seemed more natural if she had said, "I'd

love to have a visit from you soon. How about next week or the week after?"

On the other hand, there was probably nothing to it at all except a normal desire, very normal at her age, to be with her son very soon.

"And how's Lucy? I haven't seen her since Labor Day weekend, and I miss her."

"She's an absolute joy. I took her to see *The Nutcracker* last week. She had on a black velvet dress that Ellen said you gave her, and with that blond hair and all her chatter . . ."

Annette laughed. "You're nothing but a proud grandfather."

"I'll admit that. She's the image of Ellen, don't you think? And Ellen looks a lot like you."

"Undeserved credit. Ellen looks just like her mother."

Susan. Sometimes he went for days in quiet acceptance of his loss, and sometimes the very mention of her name, a face, or a fraction of song was enough to send a thrust of pain through his chest.

And he could not help but say, "I miss her terribly."

"I know. It comes at moments, doesn't it? Like a jab in the heart."

Neither one of them spoke. She was gazing into the space above his head. She's remembering my father, Gene thought, and felt her sadness.

"Yes, yes," she said, "you look back and back. It's like looking in a telescope, seeing things recede—the front lawn, the meadow, the hill, the mountain, and beyond that—each smaller and smaller the farther out you can see. As in one's life, things that happened long ago get smaller and smaller too."

He became alert. Annette was not given to philosophical platitudes. But since she was evidently not finished, he listened politely.

"There's another thing about time, another aspect. It's unfortunate, really quite sad, that more often the good things, when you're looking back through the years, seem to melt into a vague, rosy blur. It's the bad things that stand out like black stains. Have you noticed? I had a bad argument with my sister once, and even

though we made it up, when she died, I remembered it. I didn't want to remember it, but there it was. And I was so thankful that we had made up."

So that was it, the old business again. He reached over to pour a second cup of coffee and was trying to think of an inoffensive way to keep his mother from continuing the painful subject, when Roscoe jumped up and barked. Then there were voices from the front hall.

"Jenny, how are you?"

That was Lewis!

"Jenny, you look wonderful. You never get old."

That was Daisy, dear sister-in-law with the phony English accent.

"I'll hang up your coats. Go on in. Your mother's in the sunroom."

That was Jenny, the housekeeper, undoubtedly in on this business and bursting with curiosity.

There were three of them, including Cynthia, at the doorway looking in. Gene rose from his chair. There was a total shocked silence; even Annette, who had also stood up, seemed for an instant unable to move.

You've gone too far, he thought instantly. Now that you've done it, you don't know how to handle it. Poor Mother. And pity surged in his chest.

Of course it was clear now why she had been so definite about ten o'clock. She had wanted to make sure that the cars would not meet on the narrow country road and have a reason to turn back.

Annette collected herself admirably. As if this were any ordinary arrival, she greeted, kissed, offered chairs, and suggested fresh coffee. But still no one moved.

Lewis spoke first. "What is this, Mother? Is this your idea of a joke? It's a very bad one, if that's what it's meant to be."

"Not at all. Plainly and simply, I wanted to see my sons together." Her heart was trembling, but her voice was steady.

"With all respect," said Daisy, "this was a very bad idea. Lewis and I have come all the way from Washington. We've been worried. Frankly, we thought you were ill."

"Does a person have to be ill to deserve a visit from you?"

"Of course not. But you have made a dreadful mistake."

"Let the men speak for themselves, please."

There they were, the brothers, not looking at each other, not saying anything, just standing there ready to flee. They were handsome men, much alike in their dignity, their dark hair slightly silvered at the temples. Their heavy eyebrows, straight and thick, and their rather sensitive, expressive lips were like their father's. Handsome men, but still not as handsome as their father, Annette thought loyally. He would have a few thoughts for them if he were here. If they think I'm going to let them leave this room, they have another think coming.

"A dreadful mistake," repeated Daisy. "I'm sorry to say so, Mother. It hurts me."

Annette was angry. Daisy was making her more angry, with her frosty courtesy. A long time ago she had spent a year at an English boarding school and had never gotten over it, in her kilts with the safety pins and her make-believe accent. You tried to like her and mostly you did like her well enough, but there had been times when you didn't, and this was one of them.

"And I'm sorry you feel that way, Daisy. But I am their mother, and I want peace between them."

Then Lewis spoke up again. "It's too late."

"Nothing's ever too late while you're still alive."

"Water over the dam, Mother."

"That's ridiculous." She was surprising herself by being able to talk straight and stand straight, while her heart was performing so madly.

"Ridiculous?" Gene repeated. "I don't know how you can say that." The last time he had seen Lewis, they were leaving the courthouse with their lawyers. They were not speaking then and would certainly not speak now. At any rate, he thought, not after what I've been through. "When people testify against each other in a courtroom, it is hardly a laughing matter."

"You're right, Gene. I withdraw the word. Tragic is the right one."

"Oh, please," said Cynthia, addressing nobody in particular.

Gene wanted to catch his niece's eye to show, although she already must know it, that this feud with her father had nothing to do with her. But she was looking down; her face was shadowed and terribly thin. Her fashionable suit—so unlike Ellen's conservative choices—seemed only to emphasize the change in her. He had seldom seen her since her unspeakable tragedy and then only on those few occasions when they happened to be visiting Ellen at the same time. He supposed that her visits to Ellen were rare because they were too painful. Freddie was almost as old as those twins were when—

"Come, Cynthia," Daisy commanded. "You don't need this on top of everything else."

When they left, Annette stood barring the door. "Now I ask you two to listen to me," she said to Lewis and Gene. "You owe me that much. Please sit down."

"Out of love for you, I will sit," said Lewis. "I don't want to upset you any more than you already are, but, please, Mother, this is very painful, very unfair. Surely you can't have forgotten what I've been through. Between lawyers and newspaper reporters I've had more than a fair share of misery. I've been pilloried. Must I go over it all again this morning?"

"You're missing the whole point," Annette replied softly. "What I'm asking you both to do is to put all that away. It was a—a disease. Yes, a time of sickness and suffering. Would you want, if you had been sick in the hospital, to keep reliving those weeks for the rest of your life? Wouldn't you rather try to forget about them?"

"That's exactly what I've been doing. That's exactly why Daisy and I moved to Washington, where I'm working on something very worthwhile, I hope, for the general good. So I am already putting it all behind me."

"You can't have put it all behind you while you're still estranged from your brother."

"Oh, but I can! That's been my cure. Are you asking me to forgive and forget what he did to me?" Sharp, sarcastic lawyers had shamed Lewis, portraying him as a culprit, a careless incompetent who had

not bothered to investigate a serious complaint, indifferent to the possibility of the terrible consequences that had indeed occurred and would torment his dreams forever. Indifferent? Hardly. But Gene had not helped. "Am I supposed to forget the guilt he heaped on my head? It haunts me. I didn't deserve to be torn to shreds by lawyers and reporters."

"The newspapers came to me, too, after you sent them," said Gene.

Lewis's voice rose hoarsely. "I sent them? That's idiotic."

From his chair, which was as far from Lewis's chair as was possible, Gene retorted, "It's very simple. You didn't like it when I told the truth about your refusal to check on Sprague after what Victor had reported. Very simple."

"You could have toned down your remarks instead of making me look like a deliberate criminal."

Gene cried out, "You expected me to lie for you, did you? Oh, it was only a little matter of truth—"

"And honor," Lewis finished for him. Honor, from the man who had put his own daughter through hell when she dropped the man he wanted for her and made another choice.

It was all so ugly. And so terrible, coming to a head here in their mother's house. They might as well be thrusting a knife into her.

"Those poor innocents who died," Gene said. "And all you think of is yourself, how you suffered."

"You make me sick," said Lewis. "You're like all these high-sounding talkers whose hearts bleed easy tears for the world, while at home, with your own daughter, you—"

Gene lurched forward in the chair. "Damn you! What has Ellen got to do with all this? You don't know what you're talking about. Leave her out of it, understand?" Flinging out his arm in his agitation, he knocked the fruit bowl off the table. It shattered to slivers while apples and tangerines rolled away on the floor.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" he cried, stooping to pick up the mess. "I'll buy you another bowl. Watch the broken glass, you'll cut yourself."

It was not glass; it was crystal, Lalique, to be exact, and Annette's

favorite, with its delicate birds perched around the rim. They had bought it on their twenty-fifth anniversary, when they had gone abroad on the S.S. *France;* it was a memento of those lovely days.

"Never mind," she said. "We'll clean it up later. It's nothing. No, really," she added, for he, the meticulous, considerate Gene, was red with embarrassment.

"I need to get out of here. Let me get some newspapers and take it off the floor before somebody gets cut." Then, "I'm sorry, Mother, but let me go home. I'll see you another time. Next week positively."

If she did not catch them both now, she never would. Of that Annette was certain.

"No," she said harshly. "No. You are two grown men, and I can't believe that you want to behave like children. If your father were here—" She stopped, feeling the sting in the back of her nose that always preceded the gathering of tears.

"I'm glad for his sake that he isn't," Lewis said sadly.

"But I'm here! So for my sake, can't you—" she began.

"Mother, try to understand. We've lived through disaster. It broke us. You might as well try to put the pieces of that bowl together as to do what you want us to do. It can't be done, and the sooner you recognize it, the easier it will be for you."

She saw them again—so often did the same images recur—in the bathtub together and dressed on Sundays in matching sailor suits and wearing mortarboards at their college commencements. She saw them, too, as they must have looked on the terrible night when the hotel crumbled apart.

"Hate," Lewis said, "takes a lot of energy, and I need all my energy now to help my daughter. Nothing else can be as important to me except you, Mother. Certainly not my brother. Now if you'll excuse me, please, I'll go find my family."

"Good riddance," Gene said when the door closed. He had put the fruit on the tray and was picking up shards with a paper napkin. "That's about the only thing he said that I can agree with."

"Beautiful! A beautiful, worthy sentiment. God help me, could I ever have dreamed I'd live to hear it?"

"Mother." He held her shoulders and spoke softly. "I know what this must do to you. I never thought I'd live through anything like it either. But it can't be helped. It's too deep and has lasted too long. And you still have each of us whenever you want us. You know that. Only not at the same time, that's all."

Annette searched Gene's decent, intelligent face and shook her head. "I'm ashamed of you," she said in her bitterness. "Ashamed, do you hear? And you both ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

Then she wrenched herself free of his hands and went out.

IN THE meantime Daisy and her daughter, Cynthia, were in the library. Daisy was seething.

"I can't get over your grandmother. Of all people—so tactful, so old-world, really—to do a thing like this. Who knows whether those two men will come to blows in there. I don't mean that or maybe—who knows—maybe I do. They could. Anything can happen. In this world we have to be prepared for any crazy thing."

"Yes," said Cynthia a trifle sharply, as one who should know very well about that. She was at the window, staring out at gloom: wintry land, frozen pond, and lowering dark sky. "It looks like snow or sleet or something."

"Oh, great. I'd like to get back to the city before it starts. I hate driving on ice. Stop twisting your necklace; you'll break it."

"If it wants to break, let it."

Daisy scolded herself. Here I talk about a necklace, when it's her heart that's broken. From having had everything, she has nothing. It's like being bombed or burnt out or beaten to death. Damn Andrew for giving her this last blow. Damn him to the ends of the earth. If only there were something we could do for her. We talk and talk, Lewis and I. We think and try to imagine a miracle, of walking in and finding her standing calmly again, in that quiet way of hers, with that touch of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

It had been a bad idea to bring her here today. This old town had too many memories: the church, the wedding, and the party in this house when they came back from the honeymoon, her com-

ing down the stairs in her lavender dress. And then the cemetery.

"This is a beautiful room," she observed. "When your father's finished in Washington and we're home again, I think I'll redo our den in these colors. Annette won't mind if I copy her, I'm sure."

"Mom, I'm all right." Cynthia spoke without turning from the window. "You don't have to work so hard to cheer me up."

"It's not hard work. It comes naturally, darling. And you do seem to need cheering up."

"I know I'm dull company. I shouldn't have come. I'm better off working. At least I'm helping people, and that helps me."

"Well, that's true." Daisy, hesitating over a question, decided to proceed with it and ask whether there was anything new happening, any word of Andrew.

"Wouldn't I tell you if there were?"

"I should think his parents would try to get in touch with you. After all—"

"I suppose they've given up. You and Dad haven't gotten in touch with Andrew either."

"I wouldn't care to be there when your father meets him."

"As far as I can see, he never will, so you needn't worry."

Sometimes, when she was unable to fall asleep and lay still counting her heartbeats, Cynthia's thoughts churned, inventing situations in which she would have to confront Andrew: on the street; in a bus, where he would take the seat next to hers and try to argue her into letting him come back; or at the theater, where he would be sitting directly behind her and she, feeling his eyes on the back of her head, would be waiting for some vengeful, humiliating move or words from him. And as she imagined those scenes, her muscles would tense in dread.

Perhaps, inevitably, she would have to see him in the divorce court. She had no idea whether the parties did have to meet there. If they did, she would act as if he were invisible.

THE pond was dark blue. Out in the center beyond the ice, two swans and their young were swimming—their young now, in Decem-

ber, having grown to be as large as the parents. This was the time of year when, like little birds being driven out of the nest and made to fly, the cygnets were to be sent forth into the world. And Cynthia, who had known about swans ever since her grandfather had raised the first pair, wondered how many generations this present family was removed from that first. She watched now as the big one, the father, rose into the air, flew low, returned to his huddled family, rose again, and repeated the flight. He was teaching the cygnets how to fly.

Swans were monogamous, faithful.

Then, as she turned her head to follow the great white wings, she saw a car come up the driveway. Now who? Who else was coming?

Surely not Mark and Ellen?

"Oh, no! Mom, you won't believe this. Come look. It's Ellen with Mark and the children, and yes, they've got his father and mother with them too."

Daisy peered out. "Of all the senseless, confused, and idiotic messes, this gets the first place. What can have possessed Annette? If I didn't know she wasn't, I'd say she must be senile."

"Do you realize that those two fathers despise each other? They haven't been in the same room for the last— It must be eight or nine years!"

There was a slight bustle in the hall, and then a short procession, with Jenny at the head, appeared around the corner and paused for a moment of astonished recognition.

Jenny was in a red-faced fluster. "You'll all be comfortable in here. There are plenty of chairs. Can I get you anything?"

"I think we have everything. Thank you, Jenny," Ellen replied.

Indeed, they seemed to be laden; they had a tote bag full of toys, a diaper bag, and an armful of sweaters. Mark held a partially consumed baby bottle in one hand while with the other he juggled Freddie.

Now Gene has two enemies, Daisy thought. This should be interesting.

"This is quite a surprise," Mark said brightly. "We were wondering whose car that might be."

"We rented it," Daisy said.

"Do you remember each other?" asked Ellen. "My aunt, Daisy Byrne, and Mark's parents, Aaron and Brenda Sachs. Dr. Sachs."

"How do you do?" said Daisy, who only remembered black whiskers.

"Where's Gran?" asked Lucy.

The question floated for a moment until Daisy replied, "She's in the sunroom with Gene and Lewis."

Ellen gasped. "What's happening? Is it working out?"

"I doubt it. Personally, when I left there, I was thankful that neither of them is armed."

"Oh, what can Gran have been thinking of?"

"Only Gran can answer that, I'm afraid."

"It's all so sad and so unnecessary," Cynthia said.

Ellen smiled at her. Regardless of their fathers, they were fond of each other. But their paths had led them far apart. It must be agonizing for her to see me with my children, she thought.

"I think Freddie's wet," Mark said.

"What, again? Stick your hand in and feel."

"No, my mistake. I apologize, Freddie. Now get down and play with your blocks."

He's a sweet man, Cynthia thought. She watched the blocks tumble into a little pile on the floor. She hadn't seen Freddie in months, which was wrong of her. It made her sorry and ashamed to think that she, living in the same city, had been staying away. She could have come to the party when he turned one. Sending a good present was not the same. He was a cute little boy, still pudgy, like a baby.

"Do you live nearby?" asked Brenda, who, having caught Daisy's eye, felt it necessary to say something to her.

"No. We're in Washington now."

Brenda nodded. "I thought I remembered Ellen's mentioning that you had moved out of New York, but I didn't recall where to."

She was making conversation. It's like being at a funeral, waiting for the service to begin; you always feel that you have to make some remark to the stranger who's sitting next to you. What an odd

thought to be having, Brenda said to herself, and looked toward Aaron for solidarity.

But Aaron had gone down on his knees beside Freddie and the blocks. He was feeling signals in the room. They seemed to stream like electric currents speeding through the world, filling the air with messages from man to man. He sensed the vibrations. Brenda was feeling out of place, his son was uneasy, that young woman—Cynthia, wasn't that her name?—was grieving, and her mother was suppressing a boiling anger.

Ah, stop it, he admonished himself. None of this concerns you.

Lucy asked Brenda, "Is Papa Gene here?"

Brenda's glance consulted Mark, who did not see the glance because he was, in like silent fashion, consulting Ellen.

"I don't know," replied Brenda.

Lucy went to Daisy. "You said he was here with Gran. Why doesn't he come to see me?"

"I don't know," Daisy said.

"I want to see him."

"Well, you can't right now."

Spoiled, thought Daisy. When a child's that pretty, it gets too much attention. And she really did have a doll's face. You couldn't help wondering how Cynthia's Laura would have looked at this age. You wonder too much, she told herself.

"You have to wait," Ellen said.

"But I want to see him," insisted Lucy.

"Not now, Lucy." And without thinking, Ellen exclaimed to Daisy, "She really loves my father so much!"

"Apparently so," Daisy said. The child was appealing, but she was in no mood to cater to any child, however appealing. And what a stupid remark for Ellen to make, to her of all people.

Ellen was restless. When she remarked to the room at large, "I wonder whether they plan to stay in there all day," no one answered.

Aaron built a tower of blocks, which Freddie, with great glee, overturned. He kept building more until Freddie lost interest and began to forage in the bag of toys for something else, whereupon

Aaron got up, brushed off his trousers, and looked out of the window, observing that the sky was threatening.

"It's good we're staying overnight," Mark said. "I wouldn't want to be on the roads with the kids if it should get as bad as it looks."

"Are you invited for overnight?" Ellen asked Cynthia.

"We—" Cynthia started to say, when Daisy interrupted.

"We were supposed to, but we are definitely not going to. As a matter of fact, I'm ready to start right now."

"Don't you like Gran's house?" asked Lucy, turning wide blue eyes up at Daisy. "Don't you like Gran?"

Daisy liked children, but at the moment this one was really a bit much. Her parents, considering the situation, should make her keep quiet. They should see that we are all nerves here.

Lucy was surveying Daisy from top to toe. Apparently she was fascinated by her. "You have flowers on your shirt," she observed.

"I do."

"They're pretty."

"Thank you."

"Why does that man hate Papa Gene?"

This child was too smart. And why, Daisy wondered, must she fasten on me?

"I don't know. I don't know anything about it," she countered, giving Lucy the smile that often, but not always, can placate a persistent child.

"You do know. You said the man in the sunroom."

The adults looked from one to another. *Did you ever? You have to watch everything you say in front of them.*

"Grandpa," asked Lucy, losing interest in Daisy, "you don't hate Papa Gene, do you?"

Suddenly Aaron had a coughing fit. And Mark said hastily, "Come, Lucy. Come over and take a toy out of your bag and play."

"They're all baby toys, Daddy. I don't like any of them."

"You're being awfully stubborn," he said impatiently.

Brenda corrected her son. "Mark, anybody can see she's bored. She's only six. What do you expect?"

She would, Daisy thought. A social worker, I heard. Overindulgent. Crammed with pop Freudian psychology. Just tell the child to be quiet. My head is splitting.

The message came clearly to Aaron: She doesn't approve of Brenda. Country-club Republican. Captain of girls' hockey in school. Champion golfer. Champion hang glider, for all I know. I'd like to get out of this place. Can't breathe in this atmosphere.

"What on earth is going on in there?" Daisy cried.

"They'll have to be out soon," Ellen soothed. "I'm sure everything will be all right."

You think so, Cynthia thought not unkindly, because everything turned out all right for you.

"That Gene," Daisy began to protest. "There's never any telling what that man—" and stopped.

"You're forgetting yourself, Mom," Cynthia told her. "He's Ellen's father."

"I'm sorry, Ellen," Daisy said at once. "I did forget myself."

Cynthia clasped and unclasped her hands. Unbearable hostility surrounded her. Even her grandfather, looking out of his gold frame, seemed suddenly to be cold and angry, which was, she knew, absurd, for he had been a kindly man who worked in his fancy little garden and gave her his prize strawberries, warm from the sun, for breakfast.

She had to get out of this room. "I'm going for a little walk," she said.

Daisy cried, "No, Cindy, no! The minute your father comes out, we're leaving. I don't want to have to go looking for you."

"I'll only go as far as the pond. You can see me from this window. Excuse me, everyone, please."

ON THEIR broad black feet the adult swans slid over the ice as if they were on skates. The remains of cut-up bread lay on the grass at the pond's edge. Gran fed them all winter when, because the pond was frozen, they were unable to reach underwater to feed themselves. Cynthia watched them until they reached a circle of water

where those few of their young who had not yet been sent away to fend for themselves were floating. The tranquillity of these creatures and the peace of the wintry silence relieved her tension. A strong wind blew, but there was no rustle of leafage. There were no bird-calls. And she stood still, hearing the silence.

Sometimes she thought of going away to a place where she knew no one and no one knew her. She imagined a cold place, in Alaska perhaps, near a glacial lake where eagles nested in the trees. She thought of a warm place on an untouristed island where the surf rolled and broke on a quiet beach. Like a primitive person, you would just live there, simply live out each day, and all the days would roll on with little memory of the past or need to care about what was to happen in the future.

Naturally she knew, even as she was having these escapist day-dreams, that they were foolish. She knew as well as anyone could that the best, maybe the only, way to be rid of such malaise as hers is to work and be involved with other people. But she had been doing just that; she had not been thinking only of herself or feeling sorry for herself. Self-pity was disgusting.

Yet she had not been healed.

The wind was rising. It was terribly cold, so that she drew her coat tightly about her. It was a fine, warm coat of gray cashmere, so enormously expensive that she had hesitated to buy it. But when you worked in the fashion world, you could not avoid some extravagances; they were part of the job. All of that was long ago in another life, to which she never wanted to return.

She started back toward the house, thinking that something must have been resolved in there by now, most probably for the worst. She felt so sorry for Gran—naïve, hopeful Gran, who was trying so hard to arrange everything for the best.

Another car, a black Jaguar, had been added to the three in the driveway. At the sight of it she stopped short. It could not possibly be Andrew's car. But of course, it was. She went weak with outrage. Impulsively she went toward the kitchen door with the intention of hiding, but that made no sense, because they would be

looking all over for her in order to start home. And straightening her shoulders, she marched boldly through the front door into the hall.

Andrew was standing there with Jenny. Evidently he had just arrived, because he was still wearing his fleece jacket. She had a flash of recall: a windy Saturday, a search for a double stroller, and after they had bought it, the purchase of the red fleece jacket. Now she had a quick glimpse of his startled face, flushed by the wind, with dark circles under his eyes.

Furiously she demanded, "What do you think you are doing here?"

"I don't know. I was invited to come. Your grandmother telephoned. I had no idea what she wanted. She didn't say."

"Fine story. You didn't know I'd be here?"

"No, I didn't." He gave her a tentative smile. He was being conciliatory, as if he was not sure what she was going to do. And she could have struck the smile off his face.

"I don't believe you," she said. "You and my grandmother, who seems to have lost her mind, cooked this up between you."

"I can't help it if you don't believe it, but it's the truth. I'm staying for the weekend at Jack Owens's house, and your grandmother happened to meet Mary Owens in the village. That's how she knew I was with them, and she phoned me."

"Well, now that you've come, you should turn around and go."

"I can't very well do that until I've seen your grandmother, can I now, Cindy?"

"I am not Cindy to you. I am Cynthia. Or better still, I am nobody at all."

"Cynthia, can't we please talk quietly and sensibly?"

"No. No. Was there anything sensible in what you did that night? I was down—as I thought you were too—all the way down in a dark hole after we lost our children, and I was just beginning to climb up and see a trace of light, just beginning—"

"You were? But you never told me. I never saw—"

"I never got the chance that night when you thrust me back

down with my face in the mud. In mud! You did that to me. And you— Now you come using words like 'sensible.' "

"Cynthia!" Daisy's voice rang from the guest closet at the back of the hall. "We're just getting our coats. Why, what on earth are you doing here?" she cried, seeing Andrew.

Lewis strode down the hall, his voice booming. "What the devil are you doing here? Haven't you done enough to my daughter without following her?"

Now Annette came running. "Stop, Lewis! He's not doing anything to Cynthia. I invited him."

"You what? Now I've heard everything."

Suddenly the hall, which was long and almost as wide as an average room, was as crowded as a highway at rush hour. They all—even Ellen, with Freddie in her arms—came jostling out of various doors toward the little group at the front, toward the loud anger.

"Oh, Gran," cried Cynthia. "Oh, Gran, what have you done to me? Why did you do this? You knew all about—"

"Yes, I knew. That's why I did it."

Mortified by this public display of her most private emotions, Cynthia began to cry.

Daisy put her arms about her daughter. "This whole morning has been a circus. Disgusting. We're leaving. This is it. Your presence, Andrew," she said icily, "is the last straw." And she turned toward Annette. "We have to take Cynthia home. Right now. And Andrew, you stay away from her. I mean it."

"Please, please," Annette pleaded. "All right, I made a bad mistake. I meant well." Her eyes filled, and she took a white lace handkerchief out of her cuff to wipe them.

"I'll go," Andrew said. "This is too much for you. For everybody."

But Annette seized his lapel. "No. I asked you to come, and I don't want you to go like this. You haven't done anything wrong. No."

Aaron was feeling pity. It was a shame to see an old person attacked. He saw that sometimes in his practice, and he was never able to keep his mouth shut.

"Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry," he said now, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Lewis snapped, "Most of us are well acquainted with the Bible, thank you very much."

"This is a crazy house." This time Aaron whispered. "I told you, Brenda, I didn't want to come here."

Brenda sighed ruefully. "Ah, people, people. It's tragic, that's all it is."

"Disgraceful. Yelling like savages."

"Don't you think you ever did some ranting and yelling?"

"Well, maybe, but not like this."

Annette wiped her flowing eyes. As tall and erect as she was, she seemed suddenly very small.

"Papa Gene," Lucy cried, for Gene had come out of a door under the stairs. "Gran is crying."

"Here's my best friend," Aaron muttered to Brenda as he and Gene caught sight of each other.

"Do hush," said Brenda. "We're stuck here till tomorrow."

"Why can't we leave now?"

"Drive all that way back with Freddie? The trip up was too long as it is. And besides, they're predicting a storm."

Gene called over somebody's head, "Did you know about this assemblage, Mark?"

"Only that we were invited. We and my parents."

"Interesting," Gene muttered. "Very interesting." And then, turning to Annette, he put his arm around her. "Don't cry, Mother. Everybody knows you meant well. It just hasn't worked. Surely it's no fault of yours. I think it's best now that we all go home and let your house be peaceful again. Go take a rest and don't make yourself sick over a failed experiment. It's not worth it. I told you I'm coming next week to spend the day with you. I promise."

You don't have to keep your promise as far as I'm concerned, she thought, but did not say, being at the stage in which a sorrowful, defeated person throws up his hands and cries, "I don't care. Now let everything go to smash. It doesn't matter to me anymore." She

had tried tough love with her sons, but it had not worked. She had hoped that within Andrew and Cynthia, as they saw each other, a bit of their original fire would spark again. Nothing had worked. They were all going away, and let that be the end of it.

At that moment her friend Marian came almost flying out of the dining room.

"What's this?" she cried. "People are leaving? Why, lunch is already on the table."

In spite of her tears, Annette recovered her dignity as a hostess. In a most gracious tone she said, "Some of you know my dear friend Marian Lester."

"I do. I do," Lucy cried. "You gave me that doll with the straw hat on. I was going to bring it, but Mama said it was too big to fit in the bag and wouldn't let me." The child chattered on. "I'm getting a boy doll just as big for my birthday. Papa Gene's giving it to me, aren't you, Papa Gene? Why are you putting your coat on? Aren't you going to stay for lunch? Grandpa and Grandma are staying. We're going to be here until tomorrow morning. Aren't you?"

"Well . . ." Gene began, thinking, What a fine pickle, damn it.

Marian clapped her hands. "You people can't walk out like this. You simply can't do this to Annette," she said, like the schoolteacher she was. "Jenny has made a beautiful lunch, to which you were all invited. You all accepted the invitation, so do, please, put your coats away."

Well, well, thought Daisy, and just who does she think she is to order us around as if we were in her kindergarten?

Gene chuckled to himself. Hasn't she got nerve, though? I seem to remember she's a teacher. Claps her hands like one. But pretty. That tilted, pert little nose.

"Mrs. Lester," said Lewis, "I do understand, but my daughter isn't feeling well, and we really need to get her home."

Marian was not to be deterred. "It's after twelve, and you've a long ride back to the city. You'd certainly need to stop off on the way for something to eat. So you'd do a lot better to have a nice lunch now before you leave."

"Yes, do," urged Ellen, who was hoping that maybe Cynthia and Andrew would make some move, although it certainly didn't look now as though they ever could.

"You can't do this to Annette, or to Jenny either, after all her work." Marian spoke sternly. "You simply can't. If some of you can't stand one another—you see, I know all about many things—you can go separately into the dining room. It's a buffet lunch. Take what you want and go wherever you want to eat it. Some of you are talking to each other, and you can get together. There are enough rooms in this house, so you can all spread out."

"I guess we'll have to stay, Mother," said Cynthia, who was pained by the sight of Gran's woebegone face.

"I don't see how you can forgive her for this trick," replied Daisy, tossing her head in Andrew's direction.

"I don't forgive her exactly, but I feel terribly sorry for her."

"Then you're more tolerant than I am. If she were not so old, I would give her a piece of my mind. Does she think it amusing to do this sort of thing?"

Lewis upbraided his wife. "Don't be absurd. You know her better than that. Now, come on," he said irritably and, propelling his wife and daughter ahead of him, marched them into the dining room.

Chapter Six

IN THE dining room the long table was set with bowls and platters bearing sliced cold meats, a hot chicken pie, a huge, crisp vegetable salad, warm breads of three different kinds, molasses cookies, peach cake, and a mélange of fresh fruit. The bowls and platters were old porcelain, Annette's best. At the heart of their arrangement was a large bowl overflowing with cream-colored roses.

Done herself proud, as they say, remarked Andrew to himself.

There had been some slight confusion in the hall as to who would go to the table after the first three and how some of them would avoid each other. Shaken by seeing his wife again—Andrew still thought of Cynthia as his wife, not only because under the law she still was but also because he still felt attached to her—he stood at the foot of the stairs, uncertain of where he was expected to go. He was pulled about by assorted emotions—sadness, a certain amount of anger, and a miserable embarrassment over feeling superfluous. If he could decently have fled from the house, he would have done so.

Just then Gene gave him a warm greeting. "Andrew! Haven't seen you for too long," he cried, thinking at the same time that it was a pity that Lewis wasn't near enough to see the warmth of the greeting. "Come join us. We're eating with Ellen in the sunroom. Come on. Let's hurry."

Even in his present frame of mind Andrew was able to feel amusement at the "hurry," which clearly meant, "Hurry before Mark's parents get there first and shut me out."

THOSE parents of Mark's were the last to go to the table.

"Heaven only knows what they'll have to eat," Aaron grumbled. "Shrimp salad, most likely."

"Well, you're fat enough to go without one lunch if you have to," Brenda told him. At this point she had begun to feel the prevailing nasty mood.

But to Aaron's great relief, since he had had a very early breakfast, he found plenty of salad and fruit that he could eat.

These they took to the library, which, because they had already spent time there, seemed a little familiar. Nevertheless, they were feeling rather forlorn, when Mark came in with Lucy. He sat down and took a mouthful of food before he looked up over the plate and smiled at them. The smile, as both of them knew very well, was his way of telling them that he understood their discomfort. They were thinking how different it would be if he had not married Ellen. Well, it would be different for Ellen, too, if she had married that

other guy. She would probably be living in Paris, on the Place de Something or Other.

After a minute Mark said, "We're all feeling dreary. It's a very strange situation, to say the least."

"There seems to be more than one strange situation," Aaron responded.

"Weird," Brenda said. "That young couple. You would think that after their tragedy they would cling to each other."

Aaron objected. "It's not that simple. You're a social worker, and you don't know about complex relationships?"

"Well, of course I do. Something else must have happened afterward. Of course."

"It did, but not now." Mark looked significantly toward Lucy.

Brenda shuddered. "It feels as if somebody has just died in this house."

"Don't worry," Mark said. "They'll all be rushing home in a few minutes. They want to beat the weather."

The room was growing noticeably darker, and he got up to turn on the lights. Outside, the sky was iron-gray, hard and somber. Conversation seemed to wilt as the little group, with their plates on their laps, contemplated that sky. Even Lucy, thoughtfully chewing molasses cookies, was drawn into the silence.

They all looked up when Annette came in. She was traveling from one room to the other, trying to act as though it were perfectly natural for people to be thus dispersed. Having powdered her nose and removed all signs of tears, she had resolved to see things through with dignity to the end. Admittedly, she had been saved by Marian, who now was in the dining room, presiding over the tea- and coffeepots.

"How are you all doing?" Annette asked cheerfully. "Is everyone having enough to eat?"

Lucy jumped up. "I'm not. I need some cake."

"Well, of course you do. Come with me, and I'll get some for you."

"Grandpa, you come too. We'll get some for Papa Gene. He likes cake."

For a moment no one answered, and then Mark said quickly, "Grandpa's still eating. You and Gran go do it."

Now Lucy directed a frown toward Aaron. "You never want to go see Papa Gene. You never do."

At that Annette took her hand. "Come on," she said firmly. "The cake will be all gone if we don't hurry."

"We forget what children observe," Brenda remarked when they left. "Without actually understanding, they can detect so much that we think we're hiding. It's even said that infants can sense moods from indifferent handling or angry voices. . . ." Her own voice dwindled away. Neither her husband nor her son refuted her.

"LET him go, dear," Ellen said, for Lucy, kissing Freddie, was smearing the remains of her piece of cake on his cheek.

It was really remarkable, considering all you heard and read about sibling jealousy, that Lucy had accepted Freddie's arrival so well. Spunky and rough as she could be when playing with her friends, with him she was gentle and affectionate. Perhaps, Ellen thought, it is because she sees and receives so much affection at home.

"I'm bored," Lucy said.

Gene chuckled. "Now, where did she ever get that?"

"I can't imagine. She certainly hasn't heard it from me. I never have time enough to get bored."

"What's this?" Annette, still on her room-to-room tour, had just come in. "Bored? Well, naturally she is. Now that she's had lunch, there's nothing for her to do. Why don't you take her to see the swans, Ellen?"

"It's freezing outside," said Gene, protective as usual.

"Nonsense. As long as she's warmly dressed, a little fresh, cold air will be good for her. It'll be good for Freddie too."

Ellen, agreeing and glad to get out of the house, went for the clothes. She had been feeling too uneasy for comfort—uneasy and even apprehensive, as if something was going to happen. It was not usual for her to exaggerate worries, but today was exceptional. As

long as so many enemies were under one roof, there could be an explosion.

There sat Andrew, watching Freddie with a wistful smile on his serious face and who knew what anguish within—Andrew, the cause of Cynthia's disillusionment and the object of her parents' wrath.

An overheard remark might ignite Ellen's own father, who in turn might do or say something that would inflame Lewis or Aaron, or Aaron might in some way offend her father.

There was no end to it. With all that pain and anger, even people who thought themselves civilized were capable of doing crazy things.

Outdoors, she took a long breath of cold air. The brown, frozen grass crackled under her feet as, walking carefully, she carried Freddie downhill toward the pond. Lucy, as usual, ran far ahead.

Even in December it was beautiful here. When trees were bare, one saw the true grace of their branches, upraised like arms. Crows, surely not pretty birds, had their own grace, too, as they rose from their perches and sped down the sky. To an eye aware of colors there was an abundance of greens—olive and grass and moss—among the pines and spruces, the hemlocks and firs in the woods that framed Gran's property; there was even the dusty blue of a single Colorado spruce, an exotic loner among all those native greens. It could not have grown there by accident; her grandfather must have planted it. I should paint that sometime, she thought, exactly as it is now or maybe, better still, in the flicker of summer sun and shade.

All those people cooped up in the house right now could be taking a hike through the woods on the trail that Gran kept cleared for the Scouts. But no, they were nursing their grievances instead, some so old now that they would never be uprooted. It would be easier to uproot that spruce with a toy shovel.

Near the edge of the pond there was a rock, remembered from Ellen's childhood, with a flat ledge on which one could sit. From there you could see the whole pond as far as the juncture with the larger lake.

"Sit down for a minute with me," she said to Lucy, "and look around. Tell me what you see."

After making a full circle turn, Lucy said, "You told me the leaves all fall off when it's cold, but that tree has leaves."

"It's called a pin oak, and it's the only one that loses its leaves in the spring, when all the other trees are getting new ones."

"Why?"

"I really don't know. I'll find out, though, and then I'll tell you."

And she would have to find out, because Lucy would be sure to remember and ask her. She was an intense little girl, eager and curious. Ellen smiled to herself, thinking that it required a great deal of energy to keep up with this first grader. Freddie, on the other hand, was quite different; a much more placid baby than Lucy had ever been, he was sitting comfortably on her lap with the pacifier in his mouth.

"It's too cold," Lucy said.

"You're right. It's growing colder. Let's walk around the edge, nearer to the swans, and then hurry back to the house."

It was so quiet and calm here alone with her children. She was reluctant to leave, but a fine sleet was now starting to fall, stinging her face.

"Come on. Let's run. See? The swans made a long path, breaking the ice so they can swim. They do it pushing with their chests. It's hard work."

Three floated, their orange beaks proud and high, their ruffle-edged white wings like ballet skirts.

"Those must be the father and mother with one of their grown children who hasn't flown away yet," Ellen explained. "Aren't they beautiful?"

"I want to pet one."

"Oh, you can't. They're swimming."

"But if they walk over here on the ice?"

"You mustn't. They don't like it. Swans can be fierce. Even the dogs are afraid of them."

"Do they bark at the dogs?"

"No. These are mute swans. That means they don't make much noise, just grunts sometimes. When they're babies, they peep a little, that's all."

"Where do the babies live?"

"In a nest, the same as little birds do. You remember the nest they showed you at school."

"A swan's nest has to be much bigger," Lucy observed.

"Much bigger. About as big as our sofa at home."

"Where is it?"

"Way over on the other side. I don't think it's even there anymore in the winter."

"Let's look for it."

"Not now. Hey, the sleet's really coming down. Let's run."

"I want to see the nest."

"No, Lucy. I said no."

"But I'll be right back. I promise."

"No, Lucy!"

"Right back, Mommy!" And she was gone, racing over the ice toward the swans.

"Come back! Back, Lucy!" screamed Ellen.

In horror, screaming, tearing her throat, she stood there as Lucy ran; the swans, with a great splash and spread of wings, rose into the air when Lucy plunged and disappeared. Black water closed over her. For an instant Ellen looked wildly about. Then, setting the heavy baby down on the grass, she ran onto the ice, slipped, fell, got up, and slid into the water.

IN THE library Mark and his parents were still a group apart. He was on the window seat looking out toward the pond, musing to himself.

"What a queer situation I'm in today. I've always liked Cynthia, and I like Andrew too. We used to play tennis sometimes, singles on Sunday mornings. But I can't very well go talk to either of them without hurting the other."

Brenda sighed. "Poor souls. To lose a child—that's the worst."

Half hearing, Aaron shuddered. "Two of them."

He had been absorbed in his own thoughts, feeling the atmosphere of this house, this room with its portraits and books. He was thinking about the people who had lived here, old-line Americans, at home for generations in the same neighborhood among trees that were centuries old. It must be a good feeling, he thought without envy, merely ruminating. In a locked glass-fronted bookcase apart from the rest of the books in the room, he read titles: Dickens, Balzac, Thackeray. How is it that a man brought up with all these good things can be as hateful as Gene Byrne?

Then at once came the retort: And what made you so hateful toward him, Aaron? You were never brought up to hate.

"Look," he said, beckoning to his son. "These must be first editions, don't you think? What a treasure! All these great minds—"

It was exactly then, in the middle of a sentence, that he heard his son's dreadful cry.

"What? What?"

"In the pond. Oh, God, they've fallen in!"

Brenda screamed and ran to the window. "Where? Where? I don't see. . . ."

But Mark and Aaron were already fleeing through the hall and out, down the steps to the lawn.

In the hall, doors were opening. From the kitchen, the snuggery, the sunroom, and from everywhere, people were staring.

"What is it? What happened?"

"What on earth?" Gene cried. Brenda's screams had annoyed him. "What's all this racket?"

"Ellen!" Brenda screamed back at him. "Ellen— They've fallen into the pond!"

Then everyone ran. Without coats they ran out into the falling sleet, stumbling and sliding down the hill behind Mark and Aaron.

The channel of water was narrow, not much wider than the swan who had forced it open. One edge was jagged, where the ice had broken as Ellen plunged in. Now Mark jumped in to grasp Ellen as, in her thick down jacket and heavy shoes, she struggled.

"Rope! Rope!" Lewis cried helplessly.

Under his weight a piece of ice had cracked, and he jumped backward. On either side of the channel the ice was crumbling.

Andrew came running with rope. "In my trunk." He gasped. "Can you reach?" And he held the rope out to Mark.

"No! No! It's Lucy." He was weeping. "She wouldn't . . ."

At once Andrew grasped his meaning: She wouldn't know enough to catch or hold on to the rope. The pond was fifteen or twenty feet deep. The child was at the bottom. What if the rope was not long enough, anyway?

The four men, for Gene had come up behind the others, stood for a second as if mesmerized by despair until Andrew, prepared to jump in, took off his shoes and was then abruptly pushed aside.

"Let me. Tie the rope around my waist," Daisy commanded. She dropped her shoes and her skirt. "Pray God it's long enough. Tie it as low as you can. Give me three minutes. If I haven't jerked the rope, pull me up."

Ellen had collapsed onto Mark's shoulder. Aaron and Gene were trying to pull them both up onto the ice, but without a rope it was almost impossible.

Meanwhile, Andrew was holding on to the rope with both hands. It had by now grown taut—the rope was either too short or else Daisy had reached the bottom and perhaps, only perhaps, found Lucy.

There was no sound except for the steady tinkling of sleet upon the ice. The horrified little group of watchers on the rapidly whitening grass stood speechless and unmoving in the arctic cold. Like people watching a disabled plane attempt a landing while emergency equipment was prepared for disaster, their eyes were large and their lips hung open. Even the dogs stood still, as if they knew that something out of the ordinary was happening.

After who knew how long, Andrew felt a tug on the rope. "She's pulling!" he shouted. And when Lewis sprang to help him, Andrew protested, "No, let me. I'm younger than you, and you've got a bad back."

Instantly Gene came to help, leaving Aaron and Mark, who now had one arm around Ellen and the other arm resting in a vain attempt to lift himself onto the slippery ice. Together, gradually, Andrew and the two brothers pulled, fought for footing, slipped, fell, got up and pulled some more, until at last Daisy's head appeared above the water. She was blue in the face. Her hair streamed, and she had no breath left, but she was holding Lucy to her chest.

From the huddled group of women on the grass came a cry. All, even Jenny, came running. Gene seized Lucy while Daisy, her chest heaving, sank down on the ice.

"Get back, all of you," warned Andrew. "It's not solid so near the edge. Get back."

The little girl lay lifeless, her long hair dripping and her legs dangling in Gene's arms. "Oh, God," he groaned, "she isn't breathing."

Aaron snatched her away from Gene. "Give her to me." And he began to run toward the grass.

"If someone will take Ellen, please?" Mark yelled. "I can't hold on much longer."

Andrew and Lewis, who had been tending Daisy, ran with the rope, tied it tightly around Mark and Ellen, and pulled. Mark, faint from exhaustion and cold, stumbled onto the ice. Ellen was unconscious.

All was helter-skelter. Then Aaron, tense and brusque, laid Lucy on the grass and took command.

"Lay Ellen down. Somebody get Daisy back to the house. Quick! She needs warm, dry clothes, blankets, and hot drinks. Right now!" The words came out like bullets. "You—what's your name?—Andrew, can you do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?"

"No. But if you show me, I can—"

Lewis broke in. "I've done it. Where shall I—"

"Then let Andrew take your wife to the house. You, Lewis, do Ellen. I'll take the baby. Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Neither mother nor child, lying side by side, was breathing. "Do what I do. Look. Move the head back and forth as far as you can. Watch me. Back and forth. Back and forth. Open the airway. Pinch the nose. No, like this.

Pinch. Now fit your mouth on hers, tight fit, blow. Get the airflow."

Sleet poured over Aaron, who knelt there trying to pour life into his little grandchild, and over Lewis, who was doing the same for his brother's child.

Gene and the women stood waiting, trembling in their light clothing. No one stirred. Annette wept silently. Mark was supine on the grass. Cynthia, clutching the baby, watched her father. In awe Brenda watched her husband. She was confident; if it could be done, Aaron would do it.

Time passed. Whether it measured two minutes or twenty, no one there would ever be able to estimate. They would say only that it was an eternity.

Suddenly Lucy struggled and coughed. A stream of water flew out of her lungs. She began to cry, and vomited. Mark forced himself to his tottering legs and took her, wet, sobbing, and shaking, into his arms.

A few minutes later Ellen brought up a stream of water. In confusion she tried to rise, and then, as she opened her eyes and reality flowed back, she became hysterical.

"Lucy! Where's Lucy? Where's Freddie? What happened to Freddie? I left him—"

"Freddie's fine. Cynthia has him. And Lucy's right here. Look. She's all right too. Take it easy, Ellen. Take it easy," Lewis whispered. "There she is with Mark. And here's your father."

"We need a car. We need help," Aaron said. "They can't walk back."

But Marian, practical Marian, had thought of that and was already partway up the hill toward the parked cars. A few moments later her four-wheel drive came bumping over the grass, and Ellen, with Lucy clinging to her, was lifted in.

"The rest of us had better hotfoot it to the house," Aaron said. "We've been out here for a good twenty minutes or more, and hypothermia is no joke."

Soaked and shivering, with frozen fingers and feet, all those who could not fit into the Jeep ran toward the house.

AN HOUR LATER EVERYONE was gathered in the library, where Jenny had built a grand log fire. Close to its heat and crackle a big chair held Ellen, with Lucy on her lap, both of them drowsing under a thick red blanket. On the other side of the fireplace, in a pair of similar chairs and also covered with blankets, sat Mark and Daisy, with Freddie and a pile of blocks on the floor between them. On a table within easy reach was a large tray with a varied assortment of hot drinks, ranging from brandy to coffee to cocoa for Lucy. Annette, remembering that sugar was the quick remedy for exhaustion, had added a plate of sugar cookies.

"What else can a person like me, at my age, do but give food?" she asked Marian. "I should be doing something more, but I don't know what. I'm still trembling, and I feel useless."

"Useless? You're the last person to say that about herself."

"My loyal friend is speaking."

"No, it's the truth."

"I couldn't have managed today without your help, Marian."

"It wasn't much, but I'm glad I could do it. Now I'd better go home."

"You're sure you won't stay to dinner?"

"I'll stay another half hour. But the weather's getting worse, and I want to get back before dark."

The room was very still except for the sound of the fire. Those near to it were recuperating, and the others, Annette thought, were naturally respecting their rest. But it also occurred to her that this was the first time since any of them had entered the house today that they had all been in one room together. They were still scattered over a large space. Gene was on the sofa next to her. Andrew had drawn a straight chair near to the sofa, with the dogs at his feet. Cynthia, as far away from Andrew as she could get, was with her father on the other side of the room, near Daisy; they made a loose grouping with Aaron and Brenda. Such remarks as were made among them all were murmured and inaudible at Annette's end of the room. After the day's shock, she supposed, when during those awful minutes at the scene we all stood in total silence wondering

whether Ellen and Lucy were alive, this would be a normal reaction, or would it be more normal now to let one's emotions bubble over? She really did not know. She only knew that somebody must eventually say something.

So she raised her voice loud enough to be heard by everyone and inquired, "Are you all feeling any warmer?"

Aaron Sachs responded, "I am, but how are you, Mrs. Byrne?"

"Daisy," said Daisy in her crisp fashion. "And I'm fine, thank you."

"You're my all-time heroine, Aunt Daisy," Mark told her. "For the rest of my life . . . I don't know. . . . I can't express it."

"Two and three-quarter minutes by my watch without taking a breath," Andrew said. "Right up to the limit."

"A heroine," Aaron echoed. "A heroine with good lungs."

Annette glanced at Gene, who cleared his throat and leaned down to stroke Roscoe's head. When he looked up, he spoke almost shyly. "Yes. It seems that there are no better words than thank you, Daisy. Two syllables to weigh against a child's life." His voice broke. "Thank you. Thank you, Daisy."

For another few minutes no one spoke. Then Lewis was heard.

"There were a couple of young fellows at the club who went in for swimming under ice. Kind of crazy—very crazy. But Daisy did it one day. They showed her how. I was angry at her. She'll dare anything, Daisy will."

A little prickle of shame went down Annette's back. What right had she had in the first place to sniff, even mentally, at Daisy's boarding school and country club athletics? Just because she isn't like me, she scolded, I felt myself superior, a more serious person. If we all would just take a good, honest look at ourselves, we might not always like what we see.

"Hypothermia can put you in the hospital in a few minutes," Aaron was saying. "That's all you need."

Andrew mused, "Funny. When I cleaned the trunk of my car, I was going to take the rope out. I had it there from the time I got stuck in a snowbank. It was on a ski trip in Vermont," he added irrelevantly. "Lucky thing I didn't."

"I never learned to swim underwater," said Mark. "Never learned to resuscitate either. Now I mean to do it."

"Red Cross," Lewis advised. "Daisy and I took a course. Very enjoyable too."

They were all speaking without looking at one another. It was as if, Annette thought, they were addressing a public gathering or perhaps simply talking to the air or maybe just thinking out loud.

Cynthia was silent. She was watching Freddie, who, after many patient trials, had managed to build a tower of three blocks. And she tried to remember what she had read in one of her many books about the various stages of child development. What foolish worries we have! As if it matters whether a beautiful, healthy baby like this one is a bit smarter or a bit slower than the baby next door. His cheeks, which had been red from the cold, were now red from the heat. With a happy laugh he knocked the tower down. Then he began to build it again. She could not take her eyes away from him.

Yet she was aware that Andrew had craned his head in her direction. Whether he was looking at her or at Freddie, she was unable to tell, but it made no difference either way. He didn't belong here.

I should see more of Ellen and Mark, she thought. Somehow this sight of Freddie, my picking him up when he was crying there on the grass, has changed me. I never thought I could bear to hold a baby again.

"It's time for his supper," Mark said, standing up.

Cynthia said quickly, "If you'll tell me what he eats, I'll give it to him."

Mark smiled. "You want to, don't you?"

"Yes. May I?"

She saw, when he nodded, that he understood her. "He gets junior food and after that a bottle. Everything's in our tote bag in the hall. Wait. I'll give it to you."

"No, I'll find it. He'll go with me. He likes me."

"Jenny has the high chair," Annette called.

On Cynthia's lap in the snuggery Freddie was already having his bottle when Marian, in coat and boots, passed the door.

"Pretty sight," she called.

"Come in for a second. I want to thank you for helping Gran today. And for all the rest too."

"Wasn't it a horrendous day? And yet, crazy as it sounds, maybe some good will have come out of it."

"I have a feeling it will. Uncle Gene and my father have got to do a lot of thinking after this. In fact, it seemed to me in there that they already have begun."

"Death, or even the prospect of it, has a mighty powerful effect on people. I never realized how powerful until it hit me."

"I think Gran said you're a widow?"

"A sudden widow. We went to the city for a weekend vacation, had a wonderful dinner, saw a wonderful play, and went happily to bed in our hotel room. Toward morning I heard him get up, walk across the room, and fall."

Marian sat down on the edge of a chair. Her face was without expression, and strangely, that seemed to move Cynthia more than tears might have done.

"He was tall, thin, and blond, part Scandinavian, and athletic. One of those people who you think are made to live long."

"How awful for you."

"Sometimes I was angry at him. So many hours, so many days wasted. And now gone. Forever. Never." She threw out her hands, palms up. "And that's it." Then she rose, and suddenly brisk and businesslike in her customary way, she concluded, "I don't know why I got started on this. I'm sorry. That's a sweet boy. Lovely eyes. I'd better run. It's already dark."

Why I got started. Cynthia smiled wryly. You wanted to teach me a lesson, that's why. But it won't work, Marian. No, because my situation is entirely different. Entirely.

When she carried Freddie back into the library, Ellen, awake now, took him from her, leaving her with empty hands. A bad feeling of utter detachment swept over her. And she stood uncertainly, hearing the fierce wind shake the windowpanes.

"I wouldn't want to be out in a car tonight," Annette remarked.

Andrew said promptly, "That reminds me. I'd better say goodbye to you all and start right now."

"Absolutely not," Annette protested, thinking, He wants to leave because Cynthia won't even look at him. "That's a ten-mile drive, and Jenny just heard on the radio that the roads are all ice. There's plenty of room for you. This house is elastic. It stretches to fit." And as he hesitated, she added with deliberate tactlessness, "You know that. You've been here often enough. Just sit down, Andrew."

There came a restless stir in the room, as if everyone had sat too long or, having said all they were capable of saying, were uncomfortably aware of what was still unsaid.

Brenda was folding the red blankets that were no longer in use. And Annette made an announcement.

"Brenda has been making up beds for all you people tonight. Can you imagine? When I went upstairs, I found her working. You shouldn't have, Brenda."

"Well, Jenny is busy enough in the kitchen, and this really is a mob. Don't worry, your linen closet is still neat. I am the original fusspot. . . . Aaron, don't sit in that chair. What are you thinking of? Your suit is still wet."

Aaron bounced up. "I know it, but what am I going to do? I didn't bring another suit."

"Oh, my, you're soaked," cried Annette. "Doesn't anyone . . . Can't anyone . . ." And she looked around the room in appeal.

"You're the nearest to his size, Gene."

Embarrassed, Aaron laughed. "Only a six-inch difference."

Gene, fidgeting, fussed over Roscoe, which was something that, not being a dog person, he did not usually do. "I keep a few things here. I'll find something," he said, looking self-conscious.

"So that's solved," said Annette.

We'll see what happens at dinner, she thought. I'm not sure of anything, but we have made some progress, at least.

"Why don't we go up and rest?" she said cheerfully. "If you want to, I mean. I think we all deserve a rest. As for me, I need a nap before dinner. It's at seven."

Chapter Seven

THE lunch table had been transformed for dinner, thought Andrew, much as a woman wearing a sweater and skirt, however becoming, is transformed by a ball gown. Candles in silver holders glowed on pale yellow china edged in the Greek key pattern. The cream-colored roses in the large bowl had been augmented by smaller clusters going down the center of the table. Once again Annette had done herself proud. She might as well, he thought somewhat bitterly, have been adorning a wedding reception. As indeed she had once done.

Annette surveyed the table and was satisfied. Very infrequently these days were festive meals served in this lovely room that had for so many years been used to bright lights and bright conversation. Life was quiet now in this house where she lived with Jenny and the dogs. And she thought again, Okay, there's been progress since our near disaster today. But let's see what happens next.

"We'll serve ourselves from the sideboard and then sit wherever we want," she said. "Gene, will you do the wine? And Lewis, you're a good carver, so please do the roast."

"Ah, roast beef," sighed Lewis. "The cholesterol special. But I love it. The first I've had in six months."

"Aaron and Brenda, there's pasta for you. Jenny makes a marvelous red sauce without meat. And we've lots of vegetables," Annette assured them. At the same time, she could scarcely keep from laughing because Aaron looked so ridiculous in the borrowed suit.

"If you want to laugh, go ahead," Aaron said. "I had a glimpse of myself in the mirror on the way downstairs."

"Are you some sort of mind reader? Well, to tell the truth—"

Now Aaron laughed. "You don't have to say so; everyone can see it."

The trousers, at least six inches too long, were fastened up with safety pins. At the waist a large blanket pin, borrowed from Freddie's tote bag, kept the trousers from falling down.

"As long as I sit, no one can see it, so that saves my dignity."

"Tell me, how is the pasta?"

"Perfect, thank you."

"You went to so much trouble for us," Brenda said.

"It was no trouble at all. It was a pleasure."

Mark, observing from the other end of the table, had a sudden surge of pride in his mother. She was a gracious woman. He had never given any thought to her public persona, to how she might look to other people—not counting his father-in-law, and well he knew what that man's prejudice had been! There she sat, quiet and confident in her fine dark dress and her narrow necklace of sculptured gold. And he felt a great tenderness for her.

Tenderness overflowed in him. Here were Ellen, his darling, and Lucy, sitting high on Annette's two-volume *Oxford English Dictionary,* and Freddie safely asleep upstairs in the portable crib. It went without saying that these had always been far more precious to him than was his own life. Tonight, though, it seemed as if his capacity to feel a unity with other human beings had expanded, too, so that, in varying degrees, he felt able to say that he "loved"—however you wanted to define love—every soul in the room.

Annette, reading his expression, was moved by it. And again she thought she felt a kind of loosening in the atmosphere: People were beginning to converse a bit. She became suddenly aware that she had been sitting with strained, tight muscles and must relax.

They all looked so civilized. And these were the same people, the same group, that had been so savage in the front hall this morning. Maybe they had been having some serious reflections during that little nap time.

Her eyes roved from her two sons—was it purely an accident that had brought them to be sitting next to each other?—to Lucy in her pink dress to the bronze lights in Ellen's hair to Aaron Sach's neat beard, and her eyes were satisfied.

When they reached Cynthia, ah, that was another matter! Perfect in gray silk and appropriate pearls, she sat like a statue—cool, remote, and without expression. And in Annette's heart there was a painful contest between compassion and impatience. Cynthia's father and mother, apparently, had taken steps toward Andrew. And yet who was a mere grandmother to judge?

"Did you know that I fell into the water?" Lucy's voice rang out, addressing nobody in particular. "I don't remember how I got out, but I did."

"It was Aunt Daisy who rescued you," Ellen said. "You should thank her properly."

Lucy scrambled down, knocking the dictionaries to the floor, ran toward Daisy, gave her a tight hug, and proclaimed, "I'm going to tell everybody in my class what you did."

A handful, thought Daisy, returning the hug. Enough spunk for two her age. Must keep Ellen hopping. Very very sweet, all the same. Silly of me, but in a way now, I feel possessive about her.

"With every minute it becomes more incredible," Gene was saying. "What Daisy did! How can I ever express . . . or thank all of you? If I live to be a hundred . . . Excuse me." And with some embarrassment he wiped his eyes.

Awkwardly Lewis patted his brother's arm. "That's all right. You already did, and we all know. We know."

Aaron, who sat across from the two men, was surprising himself with his own reflections. Funny, I never imagined that men like these would show tears. All that stiff-upper-lip business. Of course, I don't ever get this close. It's another world. And yet here we sit with the same feelings—that little girl, that little mother today. We sit here feeding ourselves, all hungry, same stomachs, same bones, as I should know. The few times I ever saw the older one, I had no particular opinion one way or the other. He was a gentleman, that was all. Cool. Both brothers the same, I see. The only difference is the first one's daughter didn't marry my son. It looks as if they're getting together. I hope so for Annette's sake. Their sakes too. This business in a family is wrong. Wrong.

"For the rest of my life," Gene was saying, "I'll have nightmares about what could have happened."

"Well, it didn't," Lewis said. "And as for nightmares, we've both had our share of them, I guess."

As his words carried, talk ceased. Annette, who had been talking to Brenda, pricked up her ears. Daisy, who had begun to say something cordial to Andrew—for although she had been so furious with him, he had been so kind to her today—now stopped.

"Yes," Lewis said, "we've surely had plenty of them."

I admit to myself, he was thinking, that perhaps I was foolishly influenced after all. If it hadn't been for the Sprague family, the grandfather a judge, with all the prestige, I probably would have gone right in and demanded the truth. I would have raised hell.

"I seem to be having some second thoughts about things today," he said.

Gene nodded. "Yes, yes, I know what you mean. I guess circumstances alter cases, don't they? Cliché. But clichés are true."

And he wondered whether it was indeed possible that Jerry Victor really was a troublemaker with his own private agenda. Not that, if he had been, it would have altered the fact that Sprague had obviously been guilty; it would only in part have explained some of Lewis's reluctance to challenge Sprague. Perhaps, if Sprague had been my friend, I, too, would have hesitated. I have been quick to condemn. I have been closing my mind against Lewis without even trying to understand or forgive.

Annette watched her sons. It must have been hard for Gene to be second all the time, always having to wait, being the younger, for the privileges of age, even to wait to go into the business. Of course, it couldn't have been otherwise, but that can put a chip of envy on a younger brother's shoulder. Then the older one sees the chip. . . .

And suddenly words came out of her mouth, words she had certainly not intended to say. "You've been too proud to talk things out, both of you. Too proud. Your father was like that too."

"The first time you ever said anything critical about Dad!" exclaimed Lewis.

"Well, what did you think? That he was perfect? Who is, pray tell me? Pride," she repeated almost angrily.

"A man's pride shall bring him low," said Aaron, *"but he that is of a lowly spirit shall attain to honor."*

"Aaron!" Brenda wailed. "What on earth is wrong with you?"

"There's nothing wrong with him. That's from the Bible," Daisy said. "My father always quoted from the Bible."

"But the time and place!" Then, in spite of herself, Brenda had to laugh. "I'll tell you what, he's had too much wine."

"Wine is a mocker, and strong drink is riotous," retorted Aaron with a wink.

At that the laughter was so loud that Jenny peeked through the kitchen door, smiled, and shook her head in amazement.

"I want to dance," said Lucy. "We always dance."

Ellen explained. "Mark and I like to dance sometimes. We put on a CD and roll back the rugs. Lucy has her own CD. She wants to be a ballerina."

"What's Lucy's music?" Annette asked.

"*Gaîté Parisienne.* Have you got it?"

"Oh, yes. But this rug doesn't roll back."

"That's all right. I'll dance in the hall," said Lucy.

She was getting too much attention, Ellen knew, but today, why not? Today she could have anything.

So the music started. Everyone stood up and watched Lucy perform. Filled with a sense of her own importance, but more so with rhythm, she twirled her skirt and curved her arms above her head.

"Who'll dance with me?" she cried.

"I will," said Aaron in prompt response.

And adorned with safety pins, with one hand holding his trousers up and the other hand in Lucy's, he whirled with her down the length of the hall and back.

"What a good sport!" Daisy whispered to Annette in the midst of the general laughter. "I have to take my thoughts back. Both of them seemed so awkward and out of place this morning in the library, as if they resented being here."

"You never know about people till you know them," Annette responded.

She was thinking about Daisy. Who could say what quirk or insecurity had made Daisy put on what Annette called her airs? But so good, so incredibly brave . . . And she took Daisy's hand in a warm squeeze.

"Come, Mark and Ellen, join us," cried Aaron.

You can see how nice he is to Ellen, Gene thought. And the way he brought Lucy back to life. Of course, he's a doctor and you expect it, but still, the sight of him breathing life into her . . . And Brenda, the way she pitched in, making all those beds, bringing coffee and blankets . . .

Lucy called, "Come on, Papa Gene. You dance too."

So Papa Gene joined the whirl and gallop until, at last, Aaron brought it to a stop.

"I'm out of breath. Besides, I'm tripping over my trousers. Gene's trousers, I should say."

"It's clear where my husband gets his sense of humor," Ellen remarked when they had all sat down again.

Mark shook his head. "Mine's not half as good as Dad's. The funny thing is that he's quite serious while he's being funny. And when he's really serious, angry about something—watch out! Right, Mom?"

"Oh, my. Men," said Brenda.

"Men," echoed Ellen.

"When men are angry, they're like babies," Daisy said.

It's like old times in this house, Annette was thinking, with a little normal jibing and a lot of hilarity. But what if we hadn't come so near to tragedy? It would be shameful if it had to take a tragedy to bring about peace.

No, she resolved. Stubborn as I am, I would have found a way. I know I would.

When the dessert, a fluffy white meringue with strawberries, had been sliced and passed around, Mark stood up with his wineglass in hand.

"I'm proposing a toast to you, Gran. Let's face it. This morning

we were all pretty upset because of your little plan." He smiled. "And now, instead, we need to apologize, to thank you and wish you a hundred and twenty years."

"Thanks, but a hundred will do very well. Seriously, I really took a chance, didn't I? And now I look at you all. . . . I'd better stop before I get teary."

Yes, she looks, but not very long at me, thought Cynthia, nor at Andrew. You destroyed everything that I felt for you, she told him silently. She looked at him quickly and looked away. He was staring down at his plate. He doesn't even know what he did, she thought. And my parents, who love me, do not really know either. I saw them talking to him before. What a total about-face! How can they do that? They are hoping I will go back to him. Oh, I saw my mother leaning on him up the hill to the house. He brought hot towels for her and a blanket and coffee. Very nice, very kind, but what has that got to do with me? When I look at Mark and Ellen, I am so glad for them. They deserve each other. And Dad with Uncle Gene—I'm so glad for them too. It was time and past time. But all that, too, has nothing to do with what has happened to me.

They were rising from the table, Annette proposing, "Let's have coffee by the fire, or what's left of it."

In the library, the fire was barely high enough to cast a pink glow on a wall of books that were themselves a mosaic of soft colors. The coffee service was on a table, along with an enormous heap of chocolate macaroons.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Annette. "Where did these come from?"

"From your old favorite bakery on the East Side," said Gene.

"Oh, you went there too?" That was Brenda.

"Ours are from there." That was Daisy.

"We each wanted to be different," said Ellen.

And then there was more laughter over the macaroons. Annette felt the warmth of all the silliness. Feeling the peace in the room, she watched and listened.

Brenda was examining the portraits. Ellen was showing an album

of old photos to Lucy. Daisy was browsing through the bookshelves, and the men, all except Andrew, were in one corner, talking.

"I'm saving," Annette heard Mark say, "to buy into an uptown gallery. If I ever get enough together, it will be my dream come true. And I'd still have time to work on my book. I've got a publisher somewhat interested."

Gene remarked that it all sounded very worthwhile.

"Well, it may come true and it may not. Either way, we're okay, Ellen and I."

"Can't you get a loan?" asked Aaron.

"It's very hard to get one without a good deal of collateral."

For a few moments the two fathers looked at each other. Then Gene said, "This sounds like something that should be talked over some more."

"Very definitely," Aaron agreed. "It's a pity when a person has a real commitment to something and has to wait forever."

Lewis, who had been listening, remarked that that was quite true. He himself had lately been missing his own commitment. He had been wanting to get back to it with someone, though on a much smaller scale.

"Not impossible, I should think," said Gene with a meaningful smile.

"It's time for bed," Ellen called. "Lucy's falling asleep."

"I think we all are," said Aaron. "We've had a strenuous day, to say the least."

Annette turned out the lights and was the last to go upstairs. "Look at Mother," she heard Lewis remark to Gene as she closed her door. "Look at the happiness on her face."

Oh, yes, she was happy. Except for Cynthia . . . All evening Annette had tried to catch her glance, to convey a message and plea. But plainly, Cynthia wanted to hear no message or plea.

Oh, what is the matter with me? I want perfection, Annette thought as she lay down to sleep. That's what's the matter with me. As if this evening has not been enough, I want more. I want it all. And I get so impatient.

UP AND DOWN THE HALL, around the corner into the wing, which Cynthia could see from her window, all the bedroom doors had been closed for the night. This would be the first time in what seemed like years that she would be sleeping under the same roof as Andrew was. It came also to her mind that the first time they had both slept under this particular roof was the night of the party Gran had given for them when they returned from their wedding trip.

It would be far better now to forget all that. Yet there were hours in every human being's life that refused to be obliterated: times of unspeakable horror like today's or else times like the one in the photograph, so beautifully framed, that Gran had placed on the chest of drawers in this room. There they were: Andrew in the traditional black morning coat and striped trousers, she in clouds of white silk—with ushers and bridesmaids ranked on either side, all smiling—and he and she so happy that the happiness had bubbled up and wet their eyes. She stood now in the light of the bedside lamp, staring at the picture.

What innocence—summer, flowers, and a bottle of champagne in the room, kisses and joy forever after. Thank God that we never know what will happen to us tomorrow. We had all the smiles and approval, we had everything, while Ellen and Mark had to sneak away to flee the storms.

She went to the window. The sleet had ceased, so that the pond was clearly visible, gleaming out of the dimness like a coin found on a dusty street. And the whole evil scene reenacted itself: Ellen's anguish, Daisy stripping her skirt off, Andrew on the brink hauling the rope, the abandoned baby crying on the grass. The whole scene.

Afterward, there beside the fire and then later at dinner, I should have been at one with them in relief and thankfulness. In my heart, of course, I was, yet in my heart there was also something that kept me apart, like a stranger watching a drama. You hear a tragic story, and tears come to your eyes because you are human, a decent human being who feels a deep compassion, but still you are alone.

Pushing the curtain aside, she saw that clouds were slowly breaking apart and receding. Tomorrow might even be sunny. They would leave here as early as possible. Then her parents should return to Washington as soon as possible. She was not angry at them; she was only, and undeniably, hurt. And she thought again that they need not have been so cordial to Andrew. I'm going back to work, she thought. That's all I need. Work.

It was early yet, too early to sleep, but she had brought two books and could read comfortably in bed. This house, although it had never been her actual home, had always had the feel of a second home. Gran had a talent for giving comfort. In this room, with its wide bed that was probably a hundred years old, the reading lamp was perfect, the down quilt was light, and there was a tiny flowering plant in a pot on the windowsill.

Tired as Cynthia was, she took a quick shower, laid out her clothes for the morning, and put on a warm bed jacket over her chiffon nightgown. These articles, she reflected as she put them on, came from a life, or rather parts of a life, that had been spent with a husband and a career. Now both of these had been left behind.

She had not been reading for very long when somebody, no doubt Gran, who often liked a short evening chat, tapped on the door. Most likely, too, Gran would be seeking reassurance of her forgiveness for today's little trick. Poor Gran, who believed she could right everyone's wrongs. Smiling at the thought, Cynthia got up and opened the door.

"May I come in?" Andrew whispered.

"What are you thinking of?" she replied in a furious whisper. "No, you may not come in."

"Please, Cynthia. I already am halfway in."

She had opened the door wide, and indeed he was so far into the room that she was unable to close it. Now Andrew closed it firmly and stood leaning against it.

"What are you doing? Taunting me because I can't make an outcry?"

"Make one if you want to. You have the right. I am, after all, in-

vading your room. Only it might seem rather odd, since technically I am still your husband and have my right to be in your room."

"Macho man. Very funny. Go on. Say what you want and get out."

He was looking her up and down. "I remember that nightgown. My favorite color, sky blue."

She wanted to slap from his face its unreadable expression, a mix of sorrow and plea.

"You're disgusting. Go on. Take full male advantage of the fact that you're seven inches taller and weigh sixty pounds more than I do. Go on. It's typical."

"Ah, Cindy, haven't we had enough of this? It's time to get over it. Long past time."

"Is this what you've come to tell me? You're wasting your energy and mine. I'm in the middle of a good book."

"Please, listen to me. I was as shocked as you were when we met here today. I'd given up trying to communicate with you after a policeman stopped me for loitering at your—our—front door. Well, to be accurate, I had almost given up. So when Gran invited me today, I thought that maybe she had some news for me, some good news."

"It's too late for good news."

"Why is it too late? I should think that after what we've been seeing here today, you'd realize that it's never too late."

"For you and me it is," she said.

"Don't include me, Cindy. When I saw you holding Freddie today, I remembered—"

"I know too well what you remembered. And I have that, too, and more than that, to remember." She wanted to hurt him, and in a strange, perverse way of which she was entirely aware and unable to explain, she wanted to feel the hurt herself.

Andrew sat down. For a few minutes he bowed, holding his head in his hands, not speaking.

He looks white; he looks thinner, she thought. He looks beaten sitting there like that. Yet she still wanted to hurt. "You're bringing it all back," she said, breaking the silence. "It's indecent to do this to me. Haven't you done enough?"

"That silly woman— Do you think she meant anything? I don't even remember her name, if I ever knew it. I wouldn't recognize her if I were to fall over her now."

"You've told me that a few times before, I think. Are you going to leave this room, or are you going to sit here all night? I'm freezing, and I want to go back to bed."

"I'm not leaving, Cindy. I'll sit here all night if I have to. Go back to bed if you're cold."

In the bed again Cynthia drew up the quilt and propped the book against her raised knees.

"How could you have?" she burst out.

"Cindy, I make no excuse. I guess in that crazy moment I just needed to feel alive again. I'd been dead for so long."

"*You* had? And I? What had *I* been?"

"Dead too. But I believe, I hope, that if you had done what I did, I would forgive you."

Yes, dead, she thought. We had not made love for more than half a year. When your heart is broken, what's left of you breaks too.

"I make no excuse," he resumed. "I say again that I wronged you terribly and I'm sorry. Yes, I was a little bit crazy."

"Dead and crazy at the same time? Very unusual."

He got up and stood by the bed. White and thin, she thought again, like me. This has wrecked us both.

"You saw what happened today and what else could have happened," he said. "The world is a dangerous place. But we don't stop living because it is."

"A noble philosophy," she answered bitterly.

"What else can I say, then, except ask you to try again?"

"I can't." She was trembling. "I can't go back to what there was before. Now let me sleep. Will you go now?"

He shook his head.

"What are you going to do? Sit up all night?"

"No. I shall sleep on the floor."

"Damn you. I'm going to turn off the light."

For a long time she lay awake. The hurt in her chest grew with

the suffocating weight of memories: the twins, the agony, the betrayal.

The clock on the stair landing chimed once. One o'clock. She had perhaps dozed for a little while; it was often impossible to distinguish between true dreams and waking dreams. There was no sound in the room, not even a rustle. He had probably crept away while she dozed. She reached to the lamp and turned it on.

There he lay, asleep on the floor at the foot of the bed. He had removed his jacket and, in his fastidious way, much like her own, had hung it over the back of a chair. The room was too cold to be lying there on the floor in his shirtsleeves. From the easy chair in the corner she took an afghan, most likely one of those that Gran's mother had knitted, and laid it over him.

He did not awake. She stood there looking at him. He lay perfectly straight, flat on his back, as people lie in their coffins. The wedding ring was gone from his left hand; it had been his idea to have a double-ring ceremony. He needed a shave. By the end of the day he always needed another shave.

It was odd to think that she was the only person in the whole world who knew everything about him or as much as you can ever know about another human being. She knew that his eyes filled whenever there was a lost dog in a book or a movie. She knew that he carried a toothbrush in his attaché case and that in private, at home, he often ate with his fingers.

An entirely illogical swell of pity moved in her throat.

"I heard him get up," Marian had said, "walk across the room, and fall." Then she had said something like, "We wasted so much time."

"You have been too proud," Annette had said.

And Aaron had quoted, "*A man's pride shall bring him low.*"

Shivering in the chill, she kept standing there.

Damn you. She was so angry. Damn you, she said, without making a sound, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

In his sleep he must have become aware of her presence, for he opened his eyes, blinking into the lamplight. Startled then, he sat up.

"Is there anything wrong?"

"I covered you, that's all."

He was looking at her tears while she looked at his hands. They were blistered and raw.

"Your hands," she said.

"Rope burns. It's nothing."

"Have they been like that all day? Why didn't you ask for something?"

"I don't know. It seemed unimportant with so much else happening."

"I have no Vaseline, but face cream should help."

He got up, sat on the bed, and stretched out his hands. Her tears were still brimming, while, with soft fingertips, she anointed them.

When she was finished, he gave her a long, steady look and took her into his arms.

"Damn you," she said, and began to laugh.

"We'll begin again, Cindy. We can have everything again. Believe me. Everything. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Darling, turn out the light. We've waited so long."

A DECEMBER sky, thought Annette, can be as deeply blue as any sky in May. So it was in the morning as the house emptied out. In the front hall after breakfast they were gathering their coats and possessions.

"I was thinking," Gene whispered, "about your friend Marian. You may think this is foolish, but you know, in a certain way, she reminds me of Susan."

"Not foolish at all. A little tartness and a lot of sweetness. Yes, I see the resemblance."

"Perhaps I will give her a call sometime. Invite her to the theater or something."

Rather touched and a little amused by her son's apparent shyness, Annette replied quickly, "Of course. Why not?"

They were loading the cars. Lewis and Daisy were to drive back

together, while Cynthia was to go with Andrew. You had only to look at those two to know that they had slept together. Nevertheless, Cynthia, wanting to make sure that she knew, had hugged her and whispered, "Thanks," in her ear.

Annette had winked. "Okay?"

"Yes, Gran, very okay."

And so they all departed. She stood watching them roll down the driveway and down the road until they were out of sight. Turning then to look back up at the house, she was reminded of Robert Frost's lines: *Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/ They have to take you in.* Well, none of my people had to come here; it's I who wanted to take them in. And she wondered whether it needed a tragedy to make people value the treasures of home and love. I hope not, she answered herself, but maybe sometimes it does.

Back in the library, she paused before her husband's portrait.

"Well, Lewis," she said aloud, "we've had a few troubles since you left us. They're straightened out now, you'll be glad to know. Oh, I'm not naïve enough to think, for instance, that Gene and Aaron will become close, dear friends; their ways and paths are too far apart for that. But at least they accept each other now, so when they meet, it will seem natural and the children will not suffer from the poison of anger. And our sons are together again, thank God. Thank Him for Ellen and Lucy, for Andrew and Cynthia. Thank Him for everything."

Outdoors, ice was dripping glitter from the trees, and the sun was brightening toward noon. The day was splendid.

"Come, Roscoe, let's take a walk," she said. "Come, boys. I'll get my coat. Let's go."

10 LB. PENALTY

Dick Francis

They're father and son.

And they're both in the race to win.

But in this race, winning is one thing.

Surviving is quite another.

"Francis running in top form."

—Booklist

CHAPTER 1

GLUE-SNIFFING jockeys don't win the Derby.

I'd never sniffed glue in my life.

All the same I stood before the man whose horses I rode and listened to him telling me he had no further use for my services. He sat behind his large antique paper-covered desk, fidgeting with his clean fingernails. His hands were very smooth.

"I have it on good authority," he said.

"But I don't!" I protested in bewilderment. "I've never sniffed glue or anything else. Certainly not cocaine. I've never even smoked pot. It's not true."

He looked at me coldly with the knowing eyes of a powerful, assured, and physically bulky man who had inherited a good brain and a chunk of merchant bank and trained racehorses prestigiously out of obsession. I was not yet eighteen at that point and, I now know, immature for my age. I felt helpless in the face of his inaccurate certainty and had no idea how to deal with it.

"Sir Vivian—" I began with desperation, but he effortlessly cut me off with his heavier, authoritative voice.

"You can clear off at once, Benedict," he said. "I'll not have my stable contaminated by rumors of a drug-taking jockey, even if he is an amateur and not much good." He saw me flinch but went on

relentlessly. "You'll never be a top race rider. You're too big, for one thing, or at least you will be in a year or two, and frankly, you look clumsy on a horse. All arms and legs. In your hands the most collected jumper turns in a sprawling performance. With that and an unsatisfactory reputation . . . well, I no longer want you associated with my stable."

I stared at him numbly, hurt more deeply by his fairly brutal assessment of my lack of riding ability, which could perhaps be substantiated, rather than by the accusations of drug taking, which couldn't. Around me the familiar walls of his stable office seemed to recede, leaving me isolated with a thumping heart and no feeling below the ankles. All the framed photographs of past winners, all the bookshelves and the olive-green wallpaper faded away. I saw only the stony face spelling out the effective end of my long-held dream of winning all races from the Grand National down.

I expect seventeen is a better age than most to be chopped off at the ambitious knees. It just didn't feel like it at that moment.

"Outside that window," said Sir Vivian Durridge, pointing, "a car is waiting. The driver says he has a message for you. He's been waiting a good hour or more, while you've been out riding exercise."

I followed the direction of his finger and saw, across the raked gravel of the entrance driveway, a large black car inhabited solely by a chauffeur in a peaked cap.

"Who is it?" I asked blankly.

Vivian Durridge either didn't know or wasn't telling. He said merely, "On your way out you can ask him."

He made a gesture that directed me to leave, then looked steadfastly down at his desk. After a few seconds I walked unsteadily to the highly polished door and let myself out. I felt weak then and near to weeping. No one before had pitilessly accused me of something I hadn't done. No one had so ruthlessly despised my riding.

No other good trainer would let me into his stable if Vivian Durridge had kicked me out of his.

In a mist of bewildered misery I crossed the wide entrance hall, made my way through the heavy front door, and crunched across

the gravel to the car and chauffeur. I knew neither of them. The August morning sun gleamed on black spotless bodywork, and the chauffeur let down the window and stretched out a black uniformed arm, silently offering me a white, unaddressed envelope.

I took it, drew out a single white card, and read the message.

"Get in the car."

Underneath, an afterthought had been added.

"Please."

I looked back towards the big house and saw Vivian Durridge standing by his window, watching me. He made no farewell.

I understood none of it.

The handwriting on the card was my father's.

I SAT in the back seat of the car for almost an hour while the chauffeur drove slowly through the county of Sussex, south of London, approaching finally the seaside spread of Brighton. He would answer none of my questions, and after a while I stopped asking. Short of jumping out at any of the few traffic-light stops, it seemed I was going to go wherever my father had ordained, and as I had no fear of him, I would do what he asked.

I thought chiefly—and in a mixture of rage and unhappiness—of the scene in Durridge's office, his words circling endlessly in memory and not getting more bearable as time went on.

The black car drifted past Regency town houses and open-fronted souvenir shops, past old grandeur and new world commercialism, and sighed to a stop on the seafront outside a large hotel of ancient French architectural pedigree with bright beach towels drying on its decorative wrought-iron balconies.

Porters appeared solicitously. The chauffeur climbed out and ceremoniously opened the door beside me, and I stood up into the sea air, hearing gulls crying and smelling the salt on the wind and unexpectedly feeling the lift of spirits of the sandcastle holidays of childhood. The chauffeur pointed at the hotel's main door and then, still without explaining, returned to his driving seat and smoothly slid away.

"Luggage, sir?" one of the porters suggested.

I shook my head. For luggage I wore the clothes suitable for August morning exercise with the Durridge string: jodhpurs, jodhpur boots, short-sleeved shirt, and harlequin-printed lightweight zipped jacket (unzipped). I carried by its chin strap my shiny blue helmet. With a conscious effort I walked these garments into the grand hotel, but I needn't have worried. The once formal lobby buzzed like a beehive with people in cutoff shorts, flip-flop sandals, and message-laden T-shirts. The composed woman at the reception desk gave my riding clothes an incurious assessment and answered my slightly hoarse inquiry.

"Mr. George Juliard?" she repeated. "Who shall I say is here?"

"His son."

She picked up a telephone receiver, pressed buttons, spoke, listened, gave me the news.

"Please go up. Room four twelve. The lift is to your left."

My father was standing in an open doorway as I walked down a passage to 412. I stopped and watched him inspect me, as he customarily did, from my dark curly hair (impervious to straightening by water), to my brown eyes, thin face, lean frame—five foot eleven (or thereabouts) of long legs—to unpolished boots.

"Ben," he said. He breathed down his nose as if accepting a burden. "Come in."

He tried hard always to be a good father but gave no weight to my infrequent assurances that he succeeded. I was a child he hadn't wanted, the accidental consequence of his teenage infatuation with a woman biologically just old enough to be his own mother. On the day I went to Brighton I was almost as old as he had been when he fathered me.

Over the years I'd gleaned the details. There had been a hullabaloo in both extended families when they were told of the pregnancy, an even worse fuss (product of the times) when my mother refused an abortion, and a frosty turning of backs at the hasty (and happy) wedding. The marriage-day photograph was the only record I had of my mother, who, ironically, died of preeclampsia at my

birth, leaving her very young husband literally holding the baby with his envisaged bright future in ruins, it was said.

George Juliard, however, who wasn't considered bright for nothing, promptly rearranged his whole life, jettisoning the intended Oxford degree and career in law, persuading his dead wife's sister to add me to her family of four sons, and setting forth into the City to learn how to make money. He had paid for my keep and my education and had further fulfilled his duties by turning up at parent-teacher meetings and punctiliously sending me cards and gifts at Christmas and birthdays. Many fathers had done less.

I followed him into the sitting room of a suite facing the sea, the English Channel stretching blue-gray to the horizon. When George Juliard had set out with the goal of making money, he had spectacularly hit his target.

"Have you had breakfast?" he asked.

"I'm not hungry."

He ignored the untruth. "What did Vivian Durridge say to you?"

"He sacked me."

"Yes, but what did he *say?*"

"He said I couldn't ride and that I sniffed glue and cocaine."

My father stared. "He said *what?*"

"He said what you asked him to, didn't he? He said he had it on good authority."

"Did you ask him who his good authority was?"

"No." I hadn't thought of it until too late, in the car.

"You've a lot to learn," my father said.

"It was no coincidence that you sent a car to wait for me."

He smiled marginally. He was taller than I, with wider shoulders, and inhabited a more powerful version of the body I had been growing into. His hair was darker than mine and curlier, cut close on his Grecian-like head. The firmness in his face, now that he was approaching his late thirties, had been already apparent in his wedding photograph, when the gap in age had showed not at all. The bridegroom had looked the dominant partner, and the bride, smiling in her blue silk dress, had shone with youthful beauty.

"Why did you do it?" I asked, trying to sound more adult than bitter, and not managing it. "Why did you get me kicked out?"

"Ah." He walked over to a pair of glass doors leading to a balcony and opened them, letting in the vivid coastal air and the high voices from the beach, and then turned towards me.

"I have a proposition for you," he said. "It will take a good while to explain." He lifted a telephone receiver and told room service that whether or not breakfast had been officially over an hour ago, they were to send up a tray of cereal, milk, hot toast, grilled bacon with tomatoes and mushrooms, an apple, a banana, and a pot of tea. "And don't argue," he said to me, disconnecting. "You look as if you haven't eaten for a week."

I said, "Did *you* tell Sir Vivian that I take drugs?"

"No, I didn't. Do you?"

"No."

We looked at each other, virtual strangers, though as closely tied as genetically possible. I had lived according to his edicts, had been to his choice of schools. I was his product, as most teenage sons were of their fathers. I was also aware of his strict sense of honor, his clear vision of right and wrong. He was, as my four older cousins/brothers told me pityingly, a hard act to follow.

"Sit down," he said.

The room was warm. I took off my jazzy jacket and laid it on the floor with my helmet and sat in a light armchair.

"I have been selected," he said, "as a candidate in the Hoop-western by-election, to replace the sitting member of Parliament, who has died."

"Er . . ." I blinked, not quickly taking it in.

"Did you hear what I said? I am standing for Parliament."

I didn't know what I should say. Great? How awful? Why? I said blunderingly, "Will you get in?"

"It's a toss-up."

I looked vaguely around the impersonal room. He waited with a shade of impatience.

"What is the proposition?" I asked.

"Well, now." He relaxed. "Vivian Durridge treated you harshly, accusing you of taking drugs. That was his own invention."

"But what *for?*" I asked, bewildered.

"He told me you would never be more than an average, standard amateur. Never a top professional jockey. What you were doing was a waste of time."

I didn't want to believe it. I couldn't face it. I protested vehemently, "But I enjoy it."

"Yes, and if you look honestly inside yourself, you'll admit that a pleasant waste of time isn't enough for you at this stage."

"I'm not you," I said. "I don't have your . . . your . . ."

"Drive?" he suggested.

I thought it over and nodded.

"I am satisfied, though" he said, "that you have sufficient intelligence and, well, *courage* for what I have in mind."

If he intended to flatter me, of course he succeeded. Few young boys could throw overboard such an assessment.

"Father," I began.

"I thought we agreed you should call me Dad."

He had insisted at parent-teacher-schoolboy meetings that I should refer to him as Dad, and I had done so, but in my mind he was always Father, my formal and controlling authority.

"What do you want me to do?" I said.

He looked absentmindedly out the window, fiddled with his fingers, and finally said, "I want you to take up the place you've been offered at Exeter University."

"Oh." I tried not to appear either astonished or annoyed, though I felt both. He went on, however, as if I'd launched into a long, audible harangue.

"You've promised yourself a gap year, is that it?"

A gap year, so-called, was the currently fashionable pause between school and university, much praised and prized in terms of growing up in worldly experience before graduating academically. A lot to be said for it.

"You agreed I should have a gap year," I protested.

"I didn't prohibit it. That's different."

"But *can* you prohibit it? And why do you want to?"

"Until you are eighteen, I can legally do almost anything that I consider is for your own good. For the next three weeks, until your birthday on August thirty-first, I am still in charge of your life."

I said neutrally, "When I asked you ages ago, you said you thought a gap year was a good idea."

"I didn't know that you intended your gap year to be spent on a racecourse. It's a minefield of moral traps."

"You don't trust me!"

A knock on the door punctuated my bitter thoughts with the arrival of a breakfast designed to give me a practically guilt-free release from chronic hunger. The necessity of keeping to a low racing weight had occasionally made me giddy from deprivation. Even as I fell on the food ravenously, I marveled at my father's understanding of what I would actually eat and what I would reject.

"While you eat, you can listen," he said. "If you were going to be the world's greatest steeplechase jockey, I wouldn't ask what I'm going to ask of you. And I'm not asking you to give up riding altogether, just to give up trying to make it your life."

Cornflakes and milk were wonderful.

"Go to Exeter, Ben. Do your growing up *there.* You'll manage good results, as you always have done."

I zoomed through the bacon, tomatoes, and mushrooms.

"Before Exeter," he said, "I'd like you to work for *me.* I'd like you to come with me to Hoopwestern and help me get elected."

I stared at him. "But," I said, swallowing, "I don't know anything about politics."

"You don't have to. I don't want you to make speeches or policy statements. I just want you to be with me, to be part of my scene. Eat your apple," he said calmly, "and I'll explain."

He sat in one of the armchairs and crossed his legs with deliberation, as if he had rehearsed the next bit, and I thought that probably he had indeed gone over it repeatedly in his mind.

"The selection committee who chose me as their candidate," he

said, "would frankly have preferred me to be married. They saw my bachelor state as a drawback. I told them that I *had* been married, that my wife had died, and that I had a son. That cheered them up no end. What I'm asking you to do is to come with me in public. To be terribly *nice* to people."

I said absentmindedly, "To kiss babies?"

"*I'll* kiss the babies." He was amused. "*You* can chat up the old ladies . . . and talk football, cricket, and racing to the men."

I thought of the wild thrill of riding in races. I thought of the intoxication of risking my neck, of pitting such skill as I had against disaster, of completing the bucketing journeys without disgrace. I yearned for the life of carefree reckless speed—the gift given by horses—and I was beginning to learn, as everyone has to, that all of life's pleasures have strings attached. I had gone a long way down reality's road in those few hours of an August Wednesday. I could acknowledge grimly that I would never win my Grand National. But patting babies instead? Good grief!

"Polling day," he said, "is more than three weeks before term starts at Exeter. You will be eighteen by then."

"But, Father . . ." I said feebly.

"Dad."

"Dad." The word was wholly inappropriate both for the image of him as the conventionally supportive parent of a schoolboy and for my perception of him as something far different from an average man in a business suit.

The Grand National for him, I saw, was the road to Downing Street. Winning the race was the prime-ministership in Number Ten. He was asking me to abandon my own unobtainable dream to help him achieve his own.

I looked at the untouched apple, and I said, "You don't need me."

"I need to win votes. You can help with that," he said briskly. "Give it a try. Enjoy it."

He gave me an envelope full of money and told me to go out and buy clothes. "Get anything you need. We're going to Hoopwestern from here."

"But my stuff," I began.

"Your stuff, as you call it, is being packed into a box by Mrs. Wells." Mrs. Wells had rented me a room in her house along the road from the Durridge stable. "I'm paying her until the end of the month," my father said. "She's quite pleased about that, though she said that you were a pleasure to have around." He smiled. "I've arranged for your things to be collected."

It was a bit like being hit by a tidal wave, and it wasn't the first time he had yanked me out of one easy way of life and set me down on a different path. My aunt Susan, who brought me up, had felt affronted when my father plucked me out of the comprehensive school that had been "good enough" for her four sons, and insisted that I study math, my best subject, in a top fee-paying school, Malvern. My father, who had planned my life to the point of my arrival in Brighton, took it for granted that in the last three weeks of his legal guardianship I would still act as he directed.

I suppose, looking back, that many boys of seventeen would have complained and rebelled. All I can say is that they weren't dealing with a trusted and proven benevolent tyranny. And since I knew he meant me the opposite of harm, I took the envelope of money and spent it in the Brighton shops on clothes I thought his constituents would have voted for if they'd been judging a candidate by his teenage son's appearance.

We left Brighton soon after three in the afternoon and not in the morning's overpowering black car, but in a cheerful, metallic coffee-colored Range Rover with silver and gold garlands of daisylike flowers in metal paint shining along the sides.

"I'm new in the constituency," my father said, grinning. "I need to get myself noticed and recognized."

He could hardly be missed, I thought. Heads turned to watch us all along the south coast. Even so, I was unprepared for Hoopwestern, in Dorset, where it seemed that every suitable pole and tree bore a placard saying simply VOTE JULIARD. No one in the town could avoid the message.

He had driven the advertisement-on-wheels with me sitting beside

him in the front seat, and on the way he gave me nonstop instruction on what I should say and not say, do and not do, in my new role.

"Politicians," he said, "should seldom tell the whole truth."

"But you told me always to tell the truth."

He smiled sideways at my simplicity. "You better damn well tell *me* the truth. But people as a rule believe only what they want to believe, and if you tell them anything else, they'll call you a troublemaker and get rid of you and never give you your job back even if what you said is proved right."

I said slowly, "I suppose I do know that."

"And politicians," he went on, "should *never* lie."

"But what do you say if you're asked a direct question and you can't tell the truth and you can't tell a lie?"

"You say 'How very interesting' and change the subject."

He drove the Range Rover with both speed and caution, the way he lived his whole life.

"During the next weeks," he said, "remember I have political enemies. Not every smiling face is a friend."

"Do you mean . . . don't trust anyone?"

"That's exactly what I mean. People always kill Caesar. Don't trust *anyone.* It's the first law of self-preservation."

I said, "I'd rather be a jockey."

He shook his head in sorrow. "I'm afraid every world has its share of villains and cheats, jockeys not excepted."

He drove into the center of Hoopwestern, which proved to be one of those old market towns whose ancient heart had been petrified into a quaint cobbled pedestrian precinct, with the raw pulse of modern commerce springing up in huge office buildings and shopping malls on three sides around a ring road.

"This used to be a farming community," my father said. "Now the industry here is lightbulbs, and I need the lightbulb votes."

His campaign headquarters were in a remarkable back-to-back hybrid house, with an old bay-windowed frontage facing the cobbled square and a boxlike featureless shop behind, one of a row looking out over a half-acre of parking lot. The house, with basic

living accommodations for him and me upstairs, was the twin of the place next door to it, a charity gift shop.

The headquarters bustled with earnest endeavor, brightly colored telephones, a click-clacking photocopier, desks, computers, maps on the walls with colored pins, envelopes by the cartonload, and three middle-aged women enjoying the fuss. The glass-fronted premises displayed large pictures of my father, all of them projecting a good-natured, intelligent, forward-looking person who would do an excellent job in the House of Commons at Westminster.

The three women greeted him with merry cries of pleasure.

"This is my son," he said.

The merry smiles were bent my way. They looked me up and down. Three witches, I thought.

"Come in, dear," one of them said. "Cup of tea?"

THE double shop, I found, was the regular constituency office of the party to which my father belonged. It was where Dennis Nagle, the previous member of Parliament, had held his Saturday "surgeries," being present to listen to local problems. Still in his fifties, he had died, poor fellow, of pancreatic cancer. His ambitious wife, Orinda, was reportedly steaming with vitriolic anger, since the selection committee had passed her over in favor of my parent at the behest of the central party.

I learned about Orinda by sitting on an inconspicuous stool in a corner and listening to the three helpers.

The thinnest, least motherly helper said with lip-curling glee, "You'd think she'd be grieving for Dennis, but she just seems furious with him for dying. She talks about '*our* constituents,' like she always did. She said it was understood from when Dennis was first ill that she would take his place. She was absolutely stuttering with rage. She says if you think she'll meekly go away, you have another think coming. And she says she is going to tonight's dinner!"

My father grimaced.

I thought the selection committee had probably acted with good sense. From my stool I also learned that the main opposition party

was fielding "a fat slob with zero sex appeal" against my father. His—Paul Bethune's—party was confident of taking Hoopwestern since "the need for change" was in the air.

In the days that followed I saw his picture everywhere: a grin above the slogan BETHUNE IS BETTER. GIVE HIM YOUR X.

It made me laugh. Was he collecting divorcees?

On that first evening, though, all I learned of him was that he was a local councillor and losing his hair. Incipient baldness might, in fact, lose him the election, it seemed.

"My son will come with me to the dinner tonight," my father said. "He can have Mervyn's place." Mervyn Teck, he explained, was his chief of staff, who was unavoidably detained in the Midlands.

The three ladies looked me over again, nodding.

"The dinner," he explained to me briefly, "is being held at The Sleeping Dragon, the hotel across the square." He pointed through the bow-fronted windows, showing me a multigabled façade, adorned with endless geraniums in hanging baskets, barely a hundred yards away. "We'll walk over there at seven thirty. Short reception. Dinner. Public meeting in the hall to the rear of the hotel. If we get some good hecklers, it may last until midnight."

"You *want* hecklers?" I said, surprised.

"Of course. They set fire to things. Very dull otherwise."

I asked weakly, "What do I wear?"

"Just look tidy. There's a Parliament bigwig coming. I'll wear a dinner jacket to start with, but I'll strip off my black tie later. Maybe unbutton my shirt a bit. See how it goes." He smiled almost calmly, but I could sense excitement running in him deeply. He's a *fighter,* I thought. He's my father, this extraordinary man. He's kicked my dreams away and shown me a different world that I don't like very much, but I'll go with him, as he wants, for a month. I'll do my best for him, and then we'll see how it goes.

We walked across the square at seven thirty, I in gray trousers and navy blazer, he in a tuxedo. He was received with acclaim and clapping. I smiled and smiled at his shoulder and was terribly *nice* to everyone and shook hand after hand. No babies in sight.

"My son." He gestured. "This is my son."

Some of the perhaps eighty people at the reception and dinner were dressed formally like my father; others made political equality statements, like open-necked shirts and gingham with studs. The Parliament bigwig came with black bow sharply tied, his wife discreetly diamonded. I watched her being endlessly charming to strangers, and when I was introduced to her, she clasped my hand warmly and grinned into my eyes as if meeting me were the highlight of her evening. I had a long way to go, I thought, before I could put that amount of genuine friendliness into every greeting.

The dinner was a ticket affair; except for Mr. and Mrs. Bigwig and my father, everyone had paid for their presence. My father, it appeared, had paid for me. One of the evening's organizing committee was telling him he didn't have to.

"Never accept gifts," he had warned me on the drive from Brighton. "Gifts may look harmless, but they can come back to haunt you. Never put yourself into the position of having to return a favor when you know what you're being asked to do is wrong."

"Don't take sweets from strangers?"

"Exactly so."

The organizing lady informed my father that if he had had a wife, her ticket would have been free. He said with gentle, smiling finality, "I will pay for my son. Dearest Polly, don't argue."

Polly, I learned by installments, had inherited a house in the woods from her parents, along with a fortune that set her financially free to work unpaid wherever she saw the need.

Dearest Polly now turned to me with mock exasperation. "Your father. What a man!" Her gaze slid past me, and her face and voice changed from blue skies to storm. "Bugger," she said.

I looked, of course, to see the cause of the almost comic disapproval and found it was an earnest-eyed thin woman of forty or so sun-baked summers, whose tan glowed spectacularly against a sleeveless white dress. Blond streaked hair. Vitality plus.

Dearest Polly said "Orinda!" under her breath.

Orinda, the passed-over candidate, was wafting around the room,

embracing everyone extravagantly while saying loudly, "Daaarling, we must all do our best for the party even if the selectors have made this *ghastly* mistake."

"Damn her," said Polly, quietly fuming. "Dennis was a cuddly precious, you know. Can't think why he married that harpy."

Dearest Polly, herself on the angular side of cuddly, had one of those long-jawed faces from which kindness and goodwill flowed forth unmistakably. She wore dark red lipstick as if she didn't usually. It was the wrong color for her yellowish skin.

Orinda flashed her white teeth at a cameraman.

"That man's from the Hoopwestern *Gazette,*" Polly said disgustedly. "She'll make the front page."

"But she won't get to Parliament," I said.

Polly's eyes focused on me with awakening amusement. "Your father's son, aren't you! It was George's ability to identify the essential points that swayed us in his favor. There were seventeen of us on the selection panel, and to begin with, most people thought Orinda the obvious choice. She took it for granted."

And she'd reckoned without Dearest Polly, I thought.

Polly said, "I don't know how she has the nerve to bring her lover!"

"Er," I said. "What?"

"That man just behind her. He was Dennis's best friend."

I didn't see how being Dennis's best friend made anyone automatically Orinda's lover. Dennis's best friend, a person who managed to look unremarkable even in a dinner jacket, seemed abstracted more than attentive, but he did stick faithfully to Orinda's back—rather like a bodyguard, I thought.

I realized in consequence that Mr. Bigwig himself had a genuinely serious bodyguard, a young muscular-looking shadow whose attention was directed to the crowd, not his master.

I wondered if my father accepted that bodyguards would be the price of success as he went up his chosen ladder.

He began circling the room and gestured for me to join him. There was a general movement into the dining room next door,

where tables laid for ten people each were crowded into too small a space. Places were allocated by name, and my father and I found that not only were we not at the same table—he was put naturally with the Bigwigs—but I was squeezed against a distant wall between a Mrs. Leonard Kitchens and Orinda herself.

When she discovered her ignominious location, Orinda flamed with fury like a white-hot torch. She stood and tried to get general attention by tapping a glass with a knife, but the noise was lost in the bustle of eighty people clattering into their places.

"This is an insult! I always sit at the top table! I demand . . ."

No one listened.

Through the throng I saw Dearest Polly busily settling my father into a place of honor and guessed with irony that Orinda's quandary was Polly's mischief.

Orinda glared at me as I hovered politely, waiting for her to sit. She had green eyes, black-lashed. Stage-greasepaint skin.

"And who are *you?*" she demanded, then snatched up the name card in front of my place. My identity left her speechless.

"I'm his son," I said lamely. "Can I help you with your chair?"

She turned her back and spoke to her bodyguard (lover?), best friend of her dead husband. "Do something!" she instructed him.

He glanced past her in my direction and with flat, expressionless eyes dismissed me as of no consequence. He silently held Orinda's chair for her, and to my surprise she folded away most of her aggression and sat stonily, enduring what she couldn't get changed. Orinda's understated companion had power that easily eclipsed her own, all the more effective for being quiet.

Mrs. Leonard Kitchens, on my right, patted my chair with invitation. Mrs. Kitchens, large, comfortable in a loose floral dress, told me my father looked too young to have a son my size.

"Yes, doesn't he," I said.

Leonard himself, on her other side, bristled with a bad-tempered mustache and tried unsuccessfully to talk to Orinda across his wife and me. I offered to change places with him. His wife said sharply, "No."

Mrs. Leonard Kitchens's gift for small talk took us through dinner (egg salad, chicken, strawberries), and I learned that "my Leonard," her husband, was a nurseryman by trade. With the chicken Mrs. Kitchens, to my surprise, mentioned that Dennis Nagle had been an undersecretary of state in the Department of Trade and Industry, not just a rank-and-file member of Parliament. If my father won the seat, he would be a long way behind Dennis in career terms.

Mrs. Kitchens spoke conspiratorially into my right ear. "Perhaps I shouldn't tell you, dear, but Polly very naughtily changed the name cards over so as to put Orinda next to you. I saw her. She just laughed. She's never *liked* Orinda." The semiwhispering voice grew even quieter. "My Leonard was on the selection panel, and he voted for her, of course. Men always fall for her, you know." She looked at me with her big head on one side. "You're too young, of course."

To my dismay I could feel myself going red. Mrs. Kitchens laughed and shoveled her strawberries. Orinda Nagle ignored me, while pouring out nonstop complaints to her companion, who replied with grunts. I thought I would rather be almost anywhere else.

Dinner finally over, the talkative throng rose to its collective feet and transferred down a passage into the large room lit by chandeliers that made The Sleeping Dragon the area's magnet for dances, weddings, and—as now—political free-for-alls.

Orinda's companion left his name card on the table, and out of not very strong curiosity I picked it up.

"Mr. A. L. Wyvern," it said.

I let Mr. A. L. Wyvern fall back among the debris of napkins and coffee cups and without enthusiasm drifted along to the rows of folding chairs set up for the meeting. I'd read somewhere that affairs like this could draw tiny crowds, but perhaps because my father was new to the district, almost double the number of the diners had turned up, and the whole place buzzed with expectation.

It was the first political meeting I'd attended, and at that point I would have been happy if it had been my last. There were speeches from the small row of people up on a platform. Mr. Bigwig was on his feet for twenty minutes. Mrs. Bigwig smiled approvingly.

My father stood up and lightened the proceedings by making everyone laugh. I could feel my face arranging itself into Mrs. Bigwig-type soppiness and knew that in my case it had a lot to do with relief. I had been anxious that he wouldn't grab his audience, that he would embarrass me into squirming agony by being boring.

I suppose I should have known better. He told them what was right with the country and why. He told them what was wrong with the country and how to fix it. He told them what they wanted to believe, and they stamped their feet and roared their applause.

Predictably, Orinda sat rigidly, her neck as stiff as if she had an unbending rod instead of vertebrae. I could see the grim, tight muscles around her mouth. She shouldn't have come, I thought.

Dearest Polly regarded my father euphorically, as if she had invented him herself, and indeed without her he might not have been there to seize the first rung of his destiny.

Eyes alight with the triumph of his reception, he asked for questions, and true to his intention, he stripped off his tie. Then he rounded the table so that there was nothing between him on the platform and the crowd below. He opened his arms wide, embracing them. He invited them to join him in a political adventure, to build for a better world, and in particular for a better world for the constituents of Hoopwestern. He held them in his hands. He generated excitement, belief, purpose, and I swelled with amazement and pride that my father was publicly delivering the goods.

"I'm here for you," he said. "Come to my office across the square. Tell me your concerns. If you elect me, I'll work for you. I'll take your wishes to Westminster. I'll light a bulb or two in the House of Commons."

Laughter drowned him. The lightbulb factory fueled the town's economy, and he wanted the lightbulb votes.

My father's own electricity galvanized the crowd. He was serious where it mattered and funny everywhere else.

The most dedicated hecklers of the evening proved not to be Paul Bethune opposition supporters, several of whom had formed an aggressive bunch on the folding chairs, but my father's presumed

political allies Orinda Nagle and Leonard Kitchens. Both of them demanded firm commitments to policies they approved. Both shouted and pointed fingers. My father answered with unfailing good humor and stuck to the party's overall stated position.

Orinda was professional enough to see she was outgunned, but she didn't give up trying. She said that no way could an inexperienced novice like George Juliard replace her husband, however Hollywood-handsome he might be. Someone at the back of the hall booed. There was general laughter, a nervous release of the tension Orinda had built up. The impetus swung back to my father, who sincerely thanked Orinda for her years of service to the party and deftly led an appreciation to her by clapping in her direction and encouraging everyone else to copy him. The crowd gave generous but unaffectionate acclaim.

Orinda was silenced and defeated by this vote of thanks. Leonard Kitchens bounced to his feet but was shouted down. Leonard's mustache quivered with frustration as he swung from side to side like a wounded bull. His cozy wife looked as if she would deliver the *coup de grâce* when she got him home.

My father courteously admired Leonard for his faithfulness and told everyone that if elected, he would aim always for Dennis Nagle's high and honest standard. Nothing less was worthy of the people of Hoopwestern. He had them cheering. He exhorted them again to talk to him personally, and the crowd stood and surged forward to take him at his word.

Dearest Polly chatted happily with the Bigwigs and beckoned me up onto the platform. Mr. Bigwig, regarding the clamorous throng, told me that my father already had all the skills that would propel him into high office. "All he needs is luck—and to keep out of trouble," he said.

"Trouble like Paul Bethune," Polly said, nodding.

"What trouble?" asked Bigwig.

"Oh, dear!" Polly looked flustered. "George forbids us to attack Paul Bethune's character. George says negative campaigning can rebound on you. Paul Bethune has a mistress with an illegitimate

daughter by him, which he's tried hard to hush up, and George won't attack him for it."

Mrs. Bigwig looked at me assessingly. "I suppose there's no shadow over *your* birth, is there, young Ben?"

Polly assured her vehemently. "No, of course not," and I wondered if my father all those years ago could possibly have reckoned that my legitimacy would one day be important to him.

It was midnight by the time the crowd left. Mr. and Mrs. Bigwig had gone. Polly yawned with well-earned fatigue. Orinda and A. L. Wyvern were nowhere to be seen, and Mrs. Kitchens had hauled her Leonard away with the rough edge of her energetic tongue.

I waited for my father to the end, not only because I had no key to get into my bedroom above the campaign headquarters but also because he would need someone to unwind with after the cheers had died away. Even at not quite eighteen I knew that triumph needed human company afterwards. I'd gone back to an empty room in Mrs. Wells's house after three (infrequent) wins in steeplechases and had had no one to hug and yell with, no one to share the uncontainable joy. That night my father needed me. A wife would have been better, but he would need *someone.* So I stayed.

He put his arm around my shoulders.

"You'll be prime minister," I told him. "You were brilliant."

"I can do without your sarcasm, Ben."

"No, seriously, Father."

"Dad."

"Dad . . ."

Remnants of the meeting came up with shining faces to add congratulations. He shook their hands, friendly and positive to all, and we left the hall and made our way out into the warm August night.

There were streetlights around the square and the hotel lights at our back, but underfoot the cobbles were dark and lumpy. In icy winters, I learned later, people tended to skid on them and fall and crunch their bones. And on that euphoric night my father tripped on the uneven surface and went down forward on one knee, trying not to topple entirely and not managing it.

At exactly the same moment there was a loud bang and a sharp zing and a scrunch of glass breaking.

I bent down over my father and saw in the light that his eyes were stretched wide and his mouth grim and urgent with pain.

"Run," he said. "Run for cover. Dammit, run."

I stayed where I was, however.

"Ben," he said, "for God's sake. That was a gunshot."

"Yes, I know."

We were halfway across the square, easy immobile targets. He struggled to get to his feet and told me again to run, and for once in my life I made a judgment and disobeyed him.

He couldn't put his weight on his left ankle. He half rose and fell down again and beseeched me to run.

"Stay down," I told him. "Are you bleeding?"

"What? I don't think so. I twisted my ankle."

People ran out of the hotel, drawn by the bang that had reechoed around the square. There was confusion, and people saying "What happened?" and hands stretching down to help my father up. He did finally take my arm and pull himself to his feet or, rather, to his right foot. He was embarrassed rather than frightened and told the crowding well-wishers that he felt stupid losing his footing so carelessly. He said he was fine. He smiled to prove it.

"But that *noise,*" a woman said.

Heads nodded. "It sounded like . . ."

"Not here in Hoopwestern."

"Was it a *gun?*"

An important-looking man said impatiently, "A rifle shot. I'd know it anywhere. Some madman—"

"But where? There's no one here with a gun."

Everyone looked around, but it was far too late to see the rifle, let alone the person taking potshots.

My father put his arm around my shoulders for support and cheerfully indicated to everyone that we should set off again to finish the crossing of the square. The important-looking man literally shoved me out of the way, saying in his loud, authoritative way, "I'm

stronger than the lad. I'll have you over to your office in a jiffy, Mr. Juliard. You just lean on *me.*"

The man efficiently half carried my hopping father over the remaining stretch of square, the onlookers crowding around with murmurs of sympathy. I walked behind my father. It came naturally to do that. There was a high voice calling then, and I turned to find Polly running towards us, stumbling on the cobbles in strappy sandals and sounding very distressed.

"Ben . . . Ben, has George been shot?" She was out of breath and full of disbelief.

"No, Polly." I took her arm and pointed. "Look, he is there. Hopping. And hopping mad with himself for twisting his ankle."

Polly's arm was shaking, which only slowly abated when she could see that indeed George was alive and healthily swearing. I said, "It seems someone did fire a gun at the same moment that he tripped on the cobbles, but I promise you he wasn't hit. No blood."

I guess it was my own relief that convinced her. She walked beside me and followed the pied-piper-like procession to the headquarters door, where my father produced a key and let everyone in.

He hopped across to his swivel chair behind his desk and, consulting a list, telephoned the local police.

"They've had several complaints already," he told everyone, putting down the receiver. "They're on their way here."

Someone said, "What you need is a doctor," and someone else arranged for one to come. I left the hubbub and went to the open door, looking across the square to The Sleeping Dragon, who perversely had every eye wide-open, with people leaning out of upstairs windows and standing in brightly lit doorways below.

I remembered the zing of the passing bullet and thought of ricochets. My father and I had been steering a straight line from hotel to headquarters. If the bullet had been aimed at him, and if the bullet's trajectory had been from upstairs in The Sleeping Dragon (not from downstairs, because there were still too many people about), and if the bullet had smashed some glass so that I heard the tinkle, then why was the window in the bow-fronted headquarters intact?

Because, I told myself, the whole thing had been a coincidence. The bullet had not been intended to stop George Juliard's political career before it started. Of course not.

I turned to go back inside and saw for an instant a flash of light on broken glass down on the ground. It was a window of the charity shop next door that had been hit.

Zing. Ricochet. Smash. The straight trajectory could have been deflected by the curve of a cobble.

The police arrived and the doctor also. Everyone talked at once. The doctor, bandaging, said he thought the injury a sprain, not a break. Ice and elevation, he prescribed. The police listened to the self-important man's view on gunshots. I stood to one side and at one point did tell a junior-looking policeman that the glass of the charity shop's bow front was broken, and he did come outside to look. When I mentioned ricochets, he looked quizzical. I had done a bit of rifle shooting at school, I said. He nodded, unimpressed, and made a note. I followed when he returned to his colleagues.

Dearest Polly stood at my father's side and listened to everything worriedly. A man with a camera flashed several pictures. The fuss went on for a long time, and it was nearly two o'clock when I finally closed and bolted the doors and switched off the lights.

My father went upstairs backwards, sitting down. He would accept only minimal help and winced himself in and out of the bathroom and into one of the single beds in the bedroom. I was to sleep on the pullout sofa bed in the sitting room, but I ended up lying on the second bed, next to my father, half-dressed and not at all sleepy.

I had in the past twenty hours hummed along from Mrs. Wells's house on my bicycle and ridden a canter on grassy sunlit Downs. I'd had my life torn apart and entered a new world, and for long minutes I'd wondered if I would collect a bullet in the back. How could I sleep? I switched off the bedroom lamp.

In the dark my father said, "Ben, why didn't you run?"

After a pause I answered, "I didn't want you to get shot."

"So you stood in the way?"

"More fun than patting babies."

"Ben!"

After a while I said, "I'd say it was a .22 rifle, the sort used for target shooting. I'd say it was a high-velocity bullet. I know that noise well. If a .22 bullet hits you in the body, it quite likely won't kill you. You need to hit the head or the neck to be most probably lethal. All I did was shield your head."

There was a silence from the other bed. Then he said, "I'd forgotten you could shoot."

"I was on the school team. We were taught by one of the country's best marksmen." I smiled in the dark. "You paid for it, you know."

CHAPTER 2

BEFORE nine the next morning I went downstairs and unbolted the door to the parking lot at the shrill summons of a man who was standing there with his finger on the bell button. He was short, black-haired, softly plump, and very annoyed.

"Who are *you?*" he demanded.

"Benedict Juliard."

He stared at me for a moment, then brushed past and began bad-temperedly setting to rights the untidiness left all over by the events of the night.

"You're the son, I suppose," he said, picking up scattered envelopes. "George wasted all of yesterday going to collect you. Where is he, anyway? The radio is red-hot. What did happen last night?"

"Upstairs. He sprained his ankle. And who are *you?*"

"Mervyn Teck, of course." He looked impatiently at my blank face. "I'm the agent. I'm running this election. I'm here to get George Juliard into Parliament. The radio says someone shot at him. Is that true?" He went on straightening papers.

"Possibly," I said.

"Good."

I said, "Er . . . ?"

"Free publicity. We can't afford to buy airtime."

"Oh."

My father hobbled downstairs saying, "Morning, Mervyn. I see you've met my son."

Mervyn gave me an unenthusiastic glance.

"Lucky he's here," my father said. "He can drive me around."

I'd told him on the way from Brighton that I'd had driving lessons and had held a license by then for nearly five weeks. His bland expression now forbade me to reveal my inexperience.

A sharp-boned young woman arrived with disciplined hair and a power-dressing gray suit with a bright Juliard rosette pinned to one shoulder. She was introduced as Crystal Harley, Mervyn Teck's secretary. The three volunteer witches from the day before arrived one by one and smothered my father with cooing solicitude. I had forgotten their names. Faith, Marge, and Lavender, Faith chided me gently.

"Sorry."

"A good politician remembers names," Lavender told me severely. "You won't be much use to your father if you forget who people are."

Mervyn Teck and my father discussed streets and leaflet distributions. Crystal Harley entered endless details into a computer. Faith went around with a duster, and Marge set the photocopier humming. I sat on my stool and simply listened.

The relative peace of just seven bodies in the offices lasted only until an influx of the previous night's social mix trooped in and asked endless questions to which there seemed no answers. Mervyn Teck loved it. The police, the media, the party enthusiasts, and the merely curious—he welcomed them all. His candidate was not only alive but being perfectly charming to every inquirer. A TV cameraman shone his bright spotlight on my father's face and taped the sincerity of his smile. Cameras flashed. Microphones were offered, and I, doing my bit, simply smiled and smiled.

Crystal remarked to me tartly that there would hardly have been more fuss if George Juliard had been killed.

"Lucky he wasn't," I said, wedging my stool next to her.

She looked across to where my father was winning media allies with modesty and grace.

"I've met a fair number of politicians," she said. "Your father's different."

"In what way?"

"Can't you feel his power? Perhaps you can't, as you're his son. You're too close to him."

"I do sometimes feel it." It stunned me, I should have said.

"Look at last night," Crystal went on. "He set that place alight. I mean, I *work* here, and he had my pulse racing. Poor old Dennis Nagle, he was a nice, worthy man, capable in a quiet way, but he could never have got a crowd cheering, like last night."

"Could Orinda?" I asked.

Crystal was startled. "No. She can't make people laugh. But she's done devoted work in the constituency. She was always at Dennis's side. She's feeling very hurt that she wasn't selected to follow Dennis. Until your father came, she was unopposed."

"In fact," I said, "if anyone had a motive for bumping off my father, it would be her."

"Oh, but she wouldn't!" Crystal was honestly dismayed. "She can sometimes be a darling, you know. Mervyn *loves* her. He's quite put out that he's not working to get *her* elected."

My first impression of Crystal's sharp spikiness had been right only as regarded her outward appearance. She was kinder than she looked. I wondered if she had ever been anorexic: I had known anorexic girls at school. The teeth of one of them had fallen out. Crystal's teeth were straight and white, though seldom visible, owing to an overall serious view of life. I thought she was probably twenty-five or -six and hadn't had enough in life to smile about.

Mervyn Teck zigzagged to my elbow through the crowd and said it was time to think about driving my father to his day's engagements in the town of Quindle. The constituency was large in area

with pockets of concentrated inhabitation. Mervyn gave me a map with destinations marked but looked at me doubtfully.

"Are you sure you're competent enough?"

I said "Yes" with more confidence than I felt.

"One incident like last night's is a godsend," he said. "A car crash on top would be too much. We don't want any whiff of accident-prone."

"No," I said.

Across the room my father was dangling the Range Rover's keys in my direction. I went over and took them, and he, with the help of a walking stick, detached himself from the chattering well-wishers and limped out to the parking lot. I looked across to where we had left the Range Rover the previous afternoon, and my father asked me to fetch it over so that he wouldn't need to hobble that far.

I walked across to the conspicuous vehicle and stopped beside it, the keys in my hand. The sun shone, gleaming on the gold and silver painted garlands, and after a moment I turned and went back to my father.

"What's the matter?" he said. "Go and fetch it, Ben."

I frowned and went into the offices, ignoring his displeasure.

"It's time you went," Mervyn said, equally impatient. "You said you could drive George's car."

I nodded. "But I'd be better in a smaller car. Like you said, we don't want an accident. Could I borrow yours?"

Mervyn said with obvious aggravation, "My car isn't insured for drivers under twenty-one."

"Mine is," Crystal said. "But it's not very glamorous."

She dug the keys out of her handbag and said that Mervyn would give her a ride home if we were not back by five thirty. I thanked her and, with Mervyn Teck repeating his disapproval, went out to rejoin my father.

"I'm disappointed in you, Ben," he said when Mervyn explained. "You'd better practice in the Range Rover tomorrow."

"Okay. But now, before we go, would you arrange for some mechanics to come here and make sure nothing's wrong with it."

"Of course there's nothing wrong with it. I drove it to Brighton and back yesterday, and it was running perfectly."

"Yes, but it's been standing out in the car park all night. Last night it's possible someone tried to shoot you. Suppose someone's hammered a nail or two into the tires? Or anything."

I finished self-deprecatingly, as if I thought sabotage a childish fantasy, but after a brief silence my father said, "I'll go in Crystal's car. Mervyn, get the Range Rover overhauled, would you?"

Mervyn gave me a sour look, but it was he, after all, who had most wanted to avoid the accident-prone label. Or so he'd said.

In Crystal's small workaday box on wheels, I therefore drove the candidate safely to his far-flung appointments, and again I saw and heard him shake awake the apathetic voting public. We had squeezed into Crystal's car an invention of my father's that was basically two wooden boxes, one larger than the other, that would bolt together to form an impromptu stepped platform to raise a speaker above his listeners: just enough for him to be comfortably heard, not high enough to be psychologically threatening. "My soapbox," my father called it. I assembled it in three places at scattered focal points, and at each place a crowd gathered—curious or anti or uncommitted—and people would crowd around me with inquiries.

"Are you his chauffeur?"

"Yes."

"Is he as knowledgeable as he seems?"

"More so."

"What does he think about education?"

I smiled. "He's in favor of it."

"Yes, but—"

"I can't answer for him. Please ask him yourself."

They turned away and asked him, and got politically correct and truthful answers that would never be implemented without a huge increase in taxes. I was learning the economic facts as rapidly as I'd ever assimilated quadratic equations.

My father's appearances in Quindle had been well publicized in advance by posters all over the town. Volunteers met and escorted

us everywhere, their faces shining with commitment. Among the blizzard of VOTE JULIARD posters there were some for TITMUSS and WHISTLE—fringe candidates—and many for BETHUNE IS BETTER. GIVE HIM YOUR X. Bethune's notices on the whole looked tattered, and I found it wasn't merely because it was three days since he'd stomped inner Quindle on his own tour, but because the local weekly paper, the Quindle *Diary,* had hit the newsstands with BETHUNE FOR SLEAZE as its headline.

One of the volunteers having tucked the *Diary* under my elbow, I read the front page, as who wouldn't?

> As our representative in Westminster, do we want an adulterer who says he upholds the family values to which this newspaper in this young town is dedicated? Do we believe the promises of one who can't keep a solemn vow?

I read to the end and thought the whole tone insufferably pompous, but I didn't suppose it would do Bethune much good.

At each of his three ascents of the soapbox my father was bombarded with demands at least to deplore the Bethune hypocrisy, and at each place, carefully sidestepping the loaded come-ons, he attacked Bethune and his party only for their political aims and methods.

His restraint didn't altogether please his own volunteers.

"George could demolish Bethune if he would only take a hatchet to his character," one of them complained. "Why won't he do it?"

"He doesn't believe in it," I said. "He would think it cheating."

The volunteer changed his approach. "You see that thin man standing near your father, writing in a notebook?"

"Do you mean the one in a pink jogging suit and a baseball hat on backwards?"

"I do indeed. He's called Usher Rudd. He writes for the Hoopwestern *Gazette,* and his column is syndicated to the Quindle *Diary.* It's he who wrote the personal attacks on Bethune. Rudd's a highly professional slinger of mud. Never *never* trust him."

I said in apprehension, "Does my father know who he is?"

"I told George that Usher Rudd would turn up, but he doesn't

always look the same. The pink overalls and baseball cap are new."

"Usher Rudd's an unusual name."

The volunteer laughed. "He's really Bobby Rudd, always a menace. His mother was Gracie Usher before she married a Rudd. The Rudd family have a string of repair garages, but fixing cars isn't to young Bobby's taste. He calls himself an investigative journalist. More like a muckraker."

I said tentatively, "Was he at the dinner last night?"

"That big do at The Sleeping Dragon? He would have been for a certainty. He'll be furious that the gunshot and all that happened was too late for today's *Gazette.* The *Gazette* is only twenty-four pages long, mostly advertisements, sports results, and local news. Everyone buys it for the dirt Rudd digs up. He was a rotten Peeping Tom as a little boy, always had his snotty nose glued to people's windows, and he hasn't got better with time. Beware of Bobby Rudd."

"Thanks for the advice," I said.

With the present crowd listening to my galvanic father, I slowly strolled around to guard his back. I did my best to look purposeless but clearly failed, as Usher Rudd came to stand casually beside me. His baseball cap advertised sports goods, as did his footwear, and his loose exercise suit, instead of hiding the thinness of his body inside, gave an impression that the arms and legs functioned on a system of articulated rods.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Usher Rudd."

His manner was confident to arrogant. He had unexcited blue eyes, sandy lashes, and dry, freckled skin. The small boy who had peeped through windows still lived close to the surface and made me for once feel older than my years.

"What's your name?" he demanded, as I made no response.

"Benedict," I said.

"Ben," he asserted, nodding. "Ben Juliard. How old are you?" He was abrupt, as if he had a right to the information.

"Seventeen," I said without offense. "How old are *you?*"

"That's none of your business."

I gazed at him with a perplexity that was at least half genuine.

Why should he think he could ask questions that he himself would not answer? I instinctively didn't like him.

Close behind my back, my father was answering the sort of questions it was proper he should be asked: Where did he stand on education, foreign policy, taxes, and the inability of bishops to uphold the Ten Commandments? "Shouldn't sins be modernized?" someone shouted. Moses was out of date.

My father, who certainly lived by "Thou shalt not" rather than by "What can I get away with?" replied with humor, "By all means pension off Moses if you would like your neighbor to covet your ox and carry off your wife and your lawn mower. . . ."

The end of his sentence drowned in laughter and cheers, and for fifteen more minutes he had them spellbound, feeding them political nuggets in nourishing soup.

Against the final applause Usher Rudd said to me, "Birthday?"

"What?"

"Your birthday?"

"Yes," I said. "I have a birthday."

He thought me dim. "What's your mother's name?" he said.

"Sarah."

"Last name?"

"Yes. She's dead."

His expression changed. His gaze flicked downward to the Quindle *Diary,* which I held rolled in my hand. I saw him understand the obtuseness of my answers.

"Bethune deserves it," he said sharply.

"I don't know anything about him."

"Then read my column. Everyone has secrets," he declared with relish. "I find them out. I enjoy doing it. They deserve it."

"The public has a right to know?" I asked.

"Of course. If someone is setting themselves up to rule our lives, they shouldn't sleaze around on the side, should they?"

"I haven't thought about it."

"If old George is hiding dirty secrets, I'll find them out. What's your mother's name?"

"I'm sure you do a good detective job," I said mildly. "My mother's name was Sarah Juliard. Married. Dead. Sorry about that."

"I'll find out," he threatened.

"Be my guest."

My father disengaged himself from eager, clutching voters and turned to say he was ready for his lunch engagement, a volunteers' gathering in a pub.

"This," I said, indicating the inhabitant of the pink tracksuit and baseball hat, "is Usher Rudd."

"Nice to know you," my father said, automatically ready to shake hands. "Do you work for the party, er, Usher?"

"He writes for newspapers," I said. I unrolled the Quindle *Diary* so that he could see the front page. "He wrote this. He wants me to tell him my mother's name."

I was getting to know my father. Twenty-four hours earlier I wouldn't have been aware that a tiny tensing of muscles and a beat of silence meant a fizzingly fast assessment of unwelcome facts. An instant calculator of down-the-line consequences.

He smiled politely at Usher Rudd. "My wife's name was Sarah. Unfortunately, she died."

"What of?" Usher Rudd sounded aggressively rude.

"It was a long time ago." My father remained civil. "Come on, Ben, or we'll be late."

We turned away and walked three paces, and Bobby Usher Rudd, darting around and wheeling in the running shoes, came to a halt, facing us.

His voice was thin, malicious. "I'll get you deselected. Orinda Nagle will have her rights."

"Ah." My father packed all the understanding in the world into one syllable. "So you rubbished Paul Bethune to give her a clear run, is that it?"

Usher Rudd was furious. "She's worth ten of you. You'll lose." He almost danced with rage. "She would have won."

"Well . . ." My father detoured past him with me at his heels, and Usher Rudd behind us yelled the question I would never have

asked but wanted like crazy to know the answer to. "If your wife died long ago, what do you do for sex?"

My father certainly heard, but there wasn't a falter in his step. I risked a flick of a glance at his face but learned nothing. He showed no embarrassment—only, if anything, *amusement.*

The lunch in the pub was upbeat, the volunteers all intoxicated with the speech stops of the morning. In the afternoon we toured a furniture factory and then a paint factory, where the candidate, leaning on his walking stick, listened intently to local problems and promised remedies if he was elected. He shook countless hands and left behind an atmosphere of hope.

When Mervyn Teck had made the engagement, he had expected it to be Orinda who charmed the woodworkers and the color mixers, and there had been resistance in parts of the factories to a usurper. My father defused criticism by praising Orinda steadfastly without apologizing for being chosen to take her place. "A natural-born politician," one volunteer said in my ear.

On our way back to Hoopwestern, I asked my father what he thought of Usher Rudd, but he yawned, said he was flaked out, and promptly went to sleep. I drove carefully, still not instinctive in traffic, and woke the candidate by a jerking halt at a red light.

He said without preamble, as if twenty minutes hadn't passed, "Usher Rudd has red hair under that baseball cap."

"How do you know?"

"He came to the meeting last night. Polly pointed him out to me. He wore a black tracksuit and running shoes. Didn't you see him?"

"I don't remember him."

"Find out if he can shoot."

I opened my mouth to say "Wow" or "How?" and thought better of both. My father glanced at me, and I felt him smile.

"I don't think it was him," I said.

"Why not?"

"His bullets of choice are acid ink."

"Are you sure you want to be a mathematician? Why don't you try writing?"

"I want to be a jockey," I said. Might as well walk on the moon. "Father . . ."

"Dad."

"No. Father. Why do you want to be a politician?"

After a pause he said, "I am one. I can't help it."

"But you've never . . . I mean . . ."

"I've never made a move before? Don't think I haven't considered it. I've known since I was your age that one day I would try for Parliament. But I needed a solid base. I needed to prove to myself that I could make money. I needed to understand economics. And then there came a time not long ago when I said to myself 'Now or never.' So it's now."

It was the longest statement about himself that he'd ever made in my hearing, and he had simplified for my sake, I thought, an urge that had taken time to ripen and had burst out fully grown at The Sleeping Dragon. The Juliard dragon was awake now and roaring and prowling towards number Ten Downing Street.

It was well after six o'clock when we reached the office, which was empty. I unlocked the door, and we found a large note laid out prominently on Mervyn Teck's desk. "The Range Rover is in Rudd's Repair Garage. They thoroughly overhauled it and found nothing wrong."

CHAPTER 3

I EXPECTED the nervous energy of the daylong performance in Quindle to have earned my father an evening's rest, but I had barely begun to wake up to the stamina demanded of would-be public servants. It seemed that far from a quiet top-up of batteries, he was committed to another marathon shake-hands-and-smile, not this time in the chandeliered magnificence of The Sleeping Dragon's all-purpose hall, but in much more basic space, normally used as a

schooling ground for five-year-olds in Hoopwestern's outer regions.

Kids' attempts at pictures were pinned to corkboards all around the walls, mostly thin figures with big heads and spiky hair. Primary colors bombarded the eyesight to saturation point. There were several rows of the folding chairs that grew more and more familiar to me as the days passed, and a makeshift speaker's platform with a microphone that squeaked whenever tested. The lighting was of unflattering greenish white fluorescent strips. Limbo must look like this, I thought, and the unenticing room had in fact drawn the sort of audience you could count on fingers and toes and still have enough left over for an abacus.

Mervyn Teck met us on the doorstep, looking at his watch. Earnest lady volunteers crowded around the candidate with goodwill, but it was plain, ten minutes after start time, that apathy, not enthusiasm, had won the evening. I expected my father to be embarrassed by the small turnout and to hurry through the unsatisfactory proceedings, but he made a joke of it, abandoning the microphone, and sat on the edge of the platform, beckoning the sparse and scattered congregation to come forward into the first few rows to make the meeting more coherent.

His magic worked. Everyone moved forward. He spoke to them familiarly, as if addressing a roomful of friends.

Mervyn Teck looked both thoughtful and displeased.

"Something the matter?" I asked.

He said sourly, "Orinda would have drawn a much better house. They love her here. She presents prizes to the children every term. She buys them herself."

"I'm sure she'll go on doing it."

I meant it without irony, but Mervyn Teck gave me a glance of dislike and moved away. One of the volunteers sweetly told me that the time of the meeting had clashed with the current rave series on the television and that even the pubs were suffering from it on Thursday nights. Tomorrow would be different, she said. Tomorrow the town hall will be packed.

"Er," I said, "what's happening in the town hall?"

"You don't know that tomorrow night your father goes face to face in a debate with Paul Bethune?"

I shook my head.

"Fireworks," she said happily. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

My father, when I asked him about it on the short drive back to the center of Hoopwestern, seemed full of equal relish.

"I suppose," I said, "there'll be more point to it than the sort of fiasco tonight could have been."

"Every vote counts," he corrected me. "If I won only a few tonight, that's fine. They have to be persuaded one by one."

"I'm hungry," I said as we passed a brightly lit take-away, so we backtracked and bought chicken wings with bacon, and even there my father fell into political chat with the man deep-frying chips.

IN THE morning I went out and bought a copy of the *Gazette*. Sleaze and Paul Bethune filled pages 4 and 5, with photographs, but the front page was headlined JULIARD SHOT? Columns underneath said yes (eyewitnesses) and no (he wasn't hurt). The police said nothing much—they couldn't find a gun. The editor's column didn't believe that political assassination ever took place at so low a level. World leaders perhaps. Unelected local candidates never.

I walked through town looking for Rudd's Repair Garage and found the staff unlocking their premises for the day. They had a large covered workshop and a wire-fenced compound, where jobs done or waiting stood in haphazard rows. The Range Rover was in that compound, sunlight already gleaming on its metallic paint.

I asked for and reached the manager, whose name was Basil Rudd. Thin, red-haired, freckled, and energetic, his likeness to Usher Rudd made twins a possibility.

"Don't ask," he said, eyeing my newspaper. "He's my cousin. I disown him, and if you're out to be busy with your fists, you've reached the wrong man."

"Well, I really came to collect that Range Rover. It's my father's." I showed him a letter of authorization signed by my parent and also my driver's license.

"Fair enough." He opened a drawer, picked out a ring bearing two keys, and held them out for me. "I'll send the bill to Mr. Juliard's party headquarters."

"Thank you. Was there anything wrong?"

"If there was, there isn't now." He consulted a spiked work sheet. "Oil change. General check. That's all."

"Do you think I could talk to whoever did the job?"

"Whatever for?"

"Er . . . I've got to drive my father around in that vehicle and I've never driven it before and I thought I might get some tips about engine management."

Basil Rudd shrugged. "Ask for Terry. He did the work."

I thanked him and sought out Terry, who gave three instant impressions: big, bald, belly. Brown overalls, grease-stained from his job. He, too, eyed my newspaper. He spoke with venom.

"Don't mention Bobby Rudd round here."

I hadn't been going to, but I said, "Why not?"

"He'll listen to you and your missus in bed with one of them bugging contraptions, and before you know it, never mind the sex, he'll be printing what you said about the boss. Got me sacked, Bobby did."

"But," I suggested, "you're still here."

"Yeah. Basil took me on because he loathes Bobby, see. It was over in Quindle I got sacked by Bobby's dad. That's Basil's uncle—" He broke off. "If it's not to complain about Bobby Usher Rudd, what is it you want, lad?"

"I, er . . . you serviced my father's Range Rover. What was wrong with it?"

"Apart from the fancy paintwork?" He scratched his shiny head. "Foreign body in the oil sump. Nothing else."

"What sort of foreign body?"

He looked at me dubiously. "I don't rightly know."

"Well, um, how do you know it was there?"

He took his time in answering by starting at the beginning of his involvement. "A man in your party's headquarters—said his name

was Teck, or some such—he phones Basil saying there might be something dicey about a fancy Range Rover they'd got there and to send someone pronto, so I went over. This Teck guy said something about maybe someone took a potshot at your old man and to check that the Range Rover's brakes hadn't been mucked about with or anything, and to bring it here and do a thorough service, so I did."

He stopped for effect. I said obligingly, "What did you find?"

"See, it was what I *didn't* find. No plug on the sump."

"What?"

"Oil change. Routine service. I run the Range Rover over the inspection pit, and I take a spanner to unscrew the sump plug to drain out the oil, and there you are. No plug. But there's oil there, according to the dipstick. Full. So I run the engine a bit and the oil-pressure gauge reads normal, like it did on my way round here, so there has to be oil circulating round the engine, see. So if the sump plug is missing, why hasn't the oil all emptied out?"

"Well, why?"

"There's something else plugging up the hole, that's why."

"A rag?" I suggested. "A wad of tissues?"

"Nothing like that, I don't think. Something harder. Anyway, I poked a bit of wire into the hole and freed whatever was there, and the oil poured out like it always does."

"So the plug, whatever it is, is still in the sump?"

He shrugged. "I dare say so. It won't do much harm there. The sump drain hole's not much bigger than a little finger." He held up his own grimy hand. "It wasn't a *big* plug, see."

"Mm." I hesitated. "Did you tell Basil Rudd about it?"

He shook his big head. "I didn't think much of it. I found a new plug and screwed it up tight. Then I filled up with clean oil and put the Range Rover out in the yard. You'll have no trouble with it."

"I'll take it in a minute," I said. "I'll just see about settling up."

I went into the office and asked Basil Rudd if I could call the party headquarters, and he obligingly held out the phone to me.

I said to my father, "Please, could you ask whoever it was who worked on your Range Rover last if there was a normal plug on the

oil-sump drain." I relayed Terry's finding and his solution to the problem. Basil Rudd looked up sharply from a paper he was writing on, but I smiled and waited for my father's answer. He told me to stay right where I was and five minutes later was back on the line.

"My mechanic is very annoyed at any suggestion that there was any irregularity at all with any part of the Range Rover. He did a complete overhaul on Monday. So what is going on?"

"I don't exactly know. It's probably nothing."

"Let me speak to Basil Rudd," my father commanded.

The chitchat went on for several minutes. Basil Rudd said he thought I was making a hullabaloo over nothing much, but in the end he shrugged and said, "Yes, yes, all right." He put down the telephone and said to me, "Your father is sending someone for the Range Rover. He wants you to stay here for now."

He gave me a look of disfavor and said he had mountains of paperwork to see to. I said I would wait outside in the Range Rover and walked peacefully across to the wire-fenced compound. I sat behind the driving wheel, reading the instruction book.

I waited for over an hour until Basil Rudd appeared at the window beside me. I stepped down to the ground and met the man accompanying the garage owner, who announced that he had come to solve the mystery of the missing sump plug. His name, he said, was Foster Fordham. He looked more like a lawyer than a mechanic: no blue collar to his gray-and-white pin-striped shirt or his neat dark suit. He informed me that he was here to do my father a big favor, as normally he was a consultant engineer.

"I work in car-racing circles," he said. "My field is sabotage."

I no doubt looked as inadequate as I felt.

He said, "I understand that yesterday you were going to drive this vehicle to Quindle. How far is that?"

"About twelve miles."

"Dual carriageway? Flat, straight roads?"

"Mostly single lane, a lot of sharp corners, and some of it uphill."

He nodded. He said we would now take the road to Quindle and he would drive.

Perplexed but trusting, I climbed into the passenger seat and listened to the healthy purr of the engine as he started up and drove out onto the ring road. He drove in silence, watching the instrument panel as intently as the road, until we had reached the top of the long, steep incline halfway to what I thought was our destination. He stopped up there, however, and, without explaining, did a U-turn and drove straight back to Rudd's garage.

Cars flashed past, appearing from blind corners, as they had the day before. Fordham drove faster than I'd felt safe doing in Crystal's car, but if his field was racing, that was hardly surprising.

At the garage, he told Terry to drain the oil into a clean container.

"Why?" Terry asked. "I did the oil change yesterday."

Fordham didn't answer. Eventually, wearing heavy gloves, Terry unscrewed the sump plug and let the hot oil drain out as requested into a five-gallon container. Fordham had him put the container into the back of the Range Rover and then refill the engine with fresh, cool oil. Terry signaled exasperation with his eyebrows but did as he was asked.

Mr. Fordham drove composedly to headquarters and, with me faithfully following, walked into the offices, where my father was sitting with Mervyn Teck discussing politics. My father stood at the sight of us and limped outside with Fordham. Through the window I watched them talking earnestly; then Fordham took the container of oil out of the Range Rover, put it into a Mercedes standing nearby, climbed into the driver's seat, and neatly departed. My father, returning, told Mervyn cheerfully that the Range Rover could safely be driven all around the town.

We finally set off. I drove, feeling my way cautiously through the gears. My father sat beside me, accompanied by his walking stick. Mervyn Teck, carrying a megaphone, sat in the rear seat, squeezing his lumpy knees together to allow more space for helpers Lavender and Faith. The rear-seaters knew their drill from much past practice, and I with eye-opening wonderment became acquainted with the hardest work in politics, the door-to-door begging for a yes vote.

The first chosen residential street consisted of identical semide-

tached houses with clipped garden-defining hedges and short concrete drives up to firmly closed garage doors. Some of the front windows were adorned with stickers simply announcing BETHUNE. Directing me to stop, Mervyn unfastened his seat belt and, standing in the open air, began to exhort the invisible residents through the reverberating megaphone to vote "Juliard, Juliard, Juliard."

Lavender and Faith followed Mervyn out of the car, each of them carrying a bundle of stickers printed JULIARD in large letters. They began ringing front-door bells and knocking knockers and, where they got no response, tucking a sticker through the letter box. If a door was opened to them, they smiled and pointed to the Range Rover, from where my father would limp bravely up the garden path. In our slow wake we left friendly waves and a few JULIARDs in windows. By the end of the street I was bored to death.

After two more long sweeps through suburbia we respited for a late sandwich lunch in a pub.

"If ever you get invited into someone's home," my father said (as he had been five or six times that morning), "you go into the sitting room and you say 'Oh, what an attractive room!' even if you think it's hideous."

Lavender, Faith, and Mervyn nodded. I said, "That's cynical."

"You've a lot to learn."

We were sitting by a window. I looked through it to the Range Rover parked outside and reckoned that one way or another I actually had learned a lot that morning.

My father, as if following my thoughts, said lightly, "We'll talk about it later," but it wasn't until we were changing before going to the town hall debate that my father would discuss Foster Fordham.

By then I'd persuaded Mervyn to arrange a securely locked overnight garage for the Range Rover, backed by my parent who said mildly, "The boy's got a point, Mervyn. No harm in keeping it safe from thieves," and as the car belonged to my father and not to the party, he had his way.

"Foster Fordham wasn't sure how much you understood," he said, combing through his tightly curled dark hair and leaving it much

as it had been before. "What do you conclude it was all about?"

"Well, if you or I had driven the Range Rover yesterday towards Quindle, it would quite likely have crashed."

My father put down his comb. "Go on."

I said, "I think the bullet that came so near us was deliberately aimed at you, and even if it hadn't killed you, it would have stopped your campaign if you'd been badly injured. So if anyone was looking around for another way to put a stopper on you, there was the Range Rover, just standing there unguarded all night."

"Yes."

"I thought the brake fluid might have been drained so that the brakes wouldn't work," I said. "The tires might have been slashed so that you'd have a blowout when you were going fast. Things come whizzing round corners on that road to Quindle. You wouldn't have much chance in a car out of control, but a Range Rover is pretty well built—like a tank. So *you* might be unhurt in a crash, but you might kill the people you crashed *into,* or at least injure them badly, and that would stop you being elected, wouldn't it?"

My father took his time in answering. "It wasn't the brakes or the tires."

"It was the engine oil," I said. "I think Fordham knew before he came. He said he was an expert in sabotage in motor racing. It must have seemed pretty elementary to him."

My father, smiling, said, "I've known him a long time. So what did he tell me?"

This is some sort of test, I thought. I could only guess at answers, but anyhow I guessed. "Someone removed the sump plug and stuffed up the hole so that the oil couldn't all run out. The stopper was something that would fall out later, so the oil would drain out of the engine when it was going along. The engine would seize up solid, and you wouldn't be able to steer and would be like a block of stone in the middle of the road."

"Not bad. So what was the substitute plug made of?"

I'd been thinking about it. I said hesitantly, "To begin with, I thought it would be something chemical that could react with the oil

and make it like jelly, or something, so that it couldn't be pumped round the pistons. But that can't have been right, as the plug was in the sump when Foster Fordham drove fast towards Quindle and deliberately made the engine very hot; and he insisted on Terry draining out the oil when it was still hot, so I thought that perhaps the temporary stopper had melted, and Fordham has taken the oil away to see what was in it."

"Yes," my father said. "Fordham says it's an old trick. So old, it's never attempted now in motor racing."

"Well, what was the plug made of? How about *wax?*"

My father peacefully tied his unexuberantly striped tie. "Foster Fordham," he said, "will let us know."

IT WAS extraordinary, I thought as we entered the town hall for the Bethune face-to-face confrontation, how many people I'd come to recognize in only two days.

Orinda was there, torturing herself, wearing a very short gold dress with a fluffy black feather boa that twisted around her neck and arms like the snake it was named for. Her green eyes flashed. No one could be unaware of her vibrant attendance.

A pace behind her, as ever, stood her shadow, whose name I remembered with an effort was A. L. Wyvern. A.L., I thought, Anonymous Lover Wyvern. In a gray suit and a blue shirt he filled space without making an impression.

Large Mrs. Kitchens, eagle-eyed, in navy blue with purple frills, held tight to "my Leonard's" arm and succeeded in preventing him from beaming his sickly mustache into Orinda's airspace. Mervyn, of course, had arrived with Crystal at his side to take notes. Dearest Polly, at the sight of us, made an enthusiastic little run in our direction and bore off my father like a trophy to show him the lectern behind which he was to stand.

As if with a flourish of trumpets the Bethune camp arrived. There was a sprinkle of clapping. Hooray for adultery, I thought.

Paul Bethune, seen for the first time, was a portly fifty or so, with a double chin and the thinning hair that might, in the end, con-

found his chances more thoroughly than a love child. He was accompanied by a busy Mervyn Teck look-alike, who was indeed his agent, and by a nervous woman who looked at the world in upward glances from under her eyebrows. She was shown to a seat in the front row of spectators, and Polly, beckoning to me, introduced me to Paul Bethune's wife, Isobel.

Isobel emitted severe discomfort at having me sit beside her, but I gave her my best harmless grin and told her she couldn't want to avoid being there more than I did myself.

"I've only just left school," I said. "I don't know anything about politics. I understand this is the third campaign for you and Mr. Bethune, so you probably don't find it as confusing as I do."

"Oh, dear. You're such a child, you can't possibly know." She smiled weakly, then suddenly stiffened to immobility, her face pale with a worse disaster than my proximity.

I said, "What's the matter, Mrs. Bethune?"

"That man," she murmured.

I looked where she was looking, and saw Basil Rudd.

"That's not Usher Rudd, the newspaperman," I said, understanding. "That's his cousin. Basil Rudd. He mends cars."

"It's *him.* That beastly writer."

"No, Mrs. Bethune. They look alike, but that's Basil."

To my absolute horror she began to cry. I looked around urgently for help, but Polly was elbow-deep in wires to microphones and television cameras, and Paul Bethune, eyeing his wife's distress, turned away with a sharply displeased grimace.

Unkind bastard, I thought. Stupid, too. A show of fondness might have earned him votes.

Isobel Bethune stumbled to her feet, searching unsuccessfully in her handbag for something to mop up tears, and I, clumsily but with pity, offered her an arm to hold on to while I cleared a path to the door. She talked all the way in broken, half-intelligible explanations. "Paul insisted I come. He said I might as well stab him in the back if I didn't. . . . And now he'll be so furious, but what does he expect me to do after those pictures in the paper of him and

that girl. . . . He wants me to smile and pretend I don't mind."

We went out through the entrance hall with everyone arriving and staring at Isobel's tears with curiosity. I veered away from the entrance, and she came with me around the nearest corner.

The town hall formed one of the sides of the cobbled square. The Sleeping Dragon took up an adjoining side, with shops and party headquarters along the other two. Along the side of the town hall there was a sort of cloister—a covered walkway with pillars and benches. Isobel Bethune crumpled onto one of the benches, and after a craven moment of wanting to ditch her, I sat beside her and wondered what to say.

I needn't have worried. She compulsively went on pouring out her unhappiness and resentment. Her sons were just as bad, she sobbed. They sulked and argued with everything she said. If Paul got elected, it would at least take him away from home more, and, oh dear, she didn't mean to say that, but it was either him or her—and where would she go? She was at her wits' end, she said.

She was on the point of a full breakdown, I thought.

I asked, "Do your sons want Mr. Bethune to be elected?"

"They just grunt. You can't get a word out of them." She sniffed, wiping her eyes. "Paul thinks he would have beaten Orinda easily, but he says George Juliard is different. Oh! I shouldn't talk to you like this. Paul will be so cross."

"Don't tell him."

"No. . . . Would you like a drink?" She looked across at The Sleeping Dragon. "Brandy?"

I shook my head, but she said she badly needed a nerve steadier, so I went across the square with her and drank Coke while she dealt with a double Rémy Martin on ice. We sat at a small table in the bar, which was Friday night busy with couples.

Both of Isobel's hands were shaking. She left me to go "tidy up," returning with combed hair, freshened lipstick, and powdered eyelids, still clutching a tissue but more in control.

She ordered more brandy.

"I'm not going back to the town hall," she said. "I'll walk home

from here." When she picked up her refilled glass, the ice clattered in her grasp.

"Could I get you a taxi?" I asked.

She leaned across the table and put her hand on mine. "You're a nice boy," she said, "whoever your father is."

There was a flash and the whine of a film winding on, and there, a few feet away, stood the other Rudd—Bobby Usher himself—grinning triumphantly and radiating ill nature in megawatts.

Isobel Bethune lunged to her feet, but Usher Rudd, quick at getaways, was out the door before she could draw breath to shout. "I *hate* him," she said, again near to tears. "I'll kill him."

I asked the barman to phone for a taxi.

"Mrs. Bethune still owes for the drinks."

"I haven't any money," she said. "Pay for me, there's a dear."

I salvaged from my pockets the remains of the money my father had given me in Brighton and handed her all of it.

"You pay the man for the drinks. I'm not old enough yet to buy alcohol, and I'm not getting into that sort of trouble."

The barman and Isobel, both openmouthed, completed the sale.

BACK at the town hall, the debate seemed to be going well, chiefly because both candidates knew how to speak. I was no longer surprised by my father's ability to rouse, amuse, and convince, but somehow I'd expected Paul Bethune to be bombastic and as unkind as he'd seemed to his wife. Instead he delivered dryly witty and well-prepared responses to the questions.

The town hall was full. I stood by the door and watched the waves of animation roll across the faces of the audience. There could be no winner that night. They both won. Everyone applauded and went away talking.

Orinda had several times applauded Bethune. Leonard Kitchens kept his hands in his pockets. Dearest Polly's long face glowed with goodness and pleasure, and freckly Basil Rudd looked even more like his obnoxious cousin when he smiled.

No one produced a gun.

My father and Paul Bethune shook hands. Like star actors, they left the stage, each surrounded by chattering satellites. My father genuinely enjoyed it, and his spirits were helium-ballooning as we headed back to our base.

"It's quicker if we walk straight across the square," my parent said as I tried to persuade him to take the cloister. "Why do you want to walk two sides of a triangle, not one, and you a mathematician?"

"Bullets," I said.

He stopped dead. "But no one would try again!"

"You'd have said no one would try the first time, but they did."

He shook his head as if in disbelief, but he made no further objection to the cloister route. He wanted to talk about the debate. He also wanted to know why I'd missed half of it and where I'd been. I told him all of Isobel's troubles, but I could feel he was barely attending, his mind still busy with points made and lost against the lady's unfaithful man.

We left the cloister, passing dimly lit shop fronts on the way to the bay windows of the charity gift shop and, next door, the party headquarters. Polly waited there, puzzled. "Where have you been? You left ahead of me."

"The boy," my father said, pointing at me though there were precious few other boys in sight. "My son has this fixed idea that someone is violently seeking to finish off my campaign, if not my life. Dearest Polly, tell him I'll take my chances and I don't want him ever again to risk his own neck to preserve mine."

"Dearest Polly," I said—and she smiled sweetly—"this is the only father I'm ever likely to have. Persuade him to give me a real job. Persuade him he needs a full-time bodyguard. Persuade him to let me try to keep him safe."

"I don't need a bodyguard," he insisted. "I need you to be a social asset. You have this extraordinary gift—which I admit I didn't expect—of getting people to talk to you. Look at Isobel Bethune and Mrs. Kitchens, pouring information into your ears."

Polly nodded, smiling. "You're so young; you're no threat to anyone. They both need to talk, and you're safe."

I said pensively, "How about Orinda? She turned her back on me at the dinner and wouldn't say a word."

Polly clapped her hands together with laughter. "I'll give you Orinda. I'll manage it again."

"But alone," I said. "I could talk to her alone, but the Anonymous Lover never leaves her side."

"Who?"

"A. L. Wyvern."

"Anonymous Lover!" Polly exclaimed. "Enchanting. His name's Alderney, I think. He used to play golf with Dennis."

In the office, she moved around smoothly, sorting out mugs and making coffee. I couldn't guess her age nearer than ten years: between forty and fifty, I thought. She was again wearing the inappropriate crimson lipstick, this time with a green jacket over a long skirt of brownish tweed—heavy for August. With the opaque stockings and sensible shoes, one would have expected her to be clumsy, but she was graceful, as if she had once been a dancer. One could have felt sorry for Polly at first sight, I thought, but that would have been a great mistake. She had an inner certainty to go with the goodness. She was—I fished for the word—serene.

She said, pouring coffee, "I don't see any harm in Benedict appointing himself officially to look after you. After all, he hasn't done a bad job so far. Mervyn grumbled all over the town hall tonight about having to find a lockup garage because Benedict wanted one. He doesn't like Benedict giving him orders."

"It was a suggestion, not an order," my father said.

"Mervyn resents Benedict's influence over you." Polly smiled. "You're a brilliant politician on a grand scale, George, but it's your son who sees into individual minds."

My father looked at me thoughtfully.

"He's good at it," Polly said. "You've found an asset you didn't expect, so use him, George."

He opened his mouth to answer, but the telephone rang, and as I was nearest, I picked up the receiver.

"Juliard?" a voice said. It was Foster Fordham.

"Benedict. Do you want my father? He's here."

"You'll do. Have you worked out what was plugging your sump?"

"Something that would melt when the oil got really hot."

"Right. I refrigerated the oil and filtered it. There were enough wax globules to make a good thick plug. There are also cotton fibers which may have been from the wick of a candle. Now let me talk to your father."

I handed over the receiver, and Polly and I listened to half of a long discussion about whether or not to report the sabotage to the police. "They don't have the manpower for surveillance. . . . They won't do it. . . . You can't guard against a determined assassin. . . . Yes. . . ." My father's gaze slid my way. "But he's too young. . . . All right, then. We're agreed." He put down the receiver with a sigh. "Foster Fordham will write a report for the police. Ben will nanny me to the best of his ability, and Mervyn will have to put up with it. And now, Dearest Polly, I'm going to abandon tomorrow's canvassing and go where I'm not expected."

Hanging on one wall was a large appointments calendar with a square allocated to each day. Crystal had entered the basics of my father's plans in the squares.

The Quindle engagements and the school evening were listed for Thursday, and door-to-door canvassing and the town hall debate for Friday. More of the same stretched ahead. How could he face it? I wondered. How could he *enjoy* it, as he clearly did?

"Tomorrow," he said, pleased with his inspiration, "tomorrow we'll go to Dorset County racecourse. Tomorrow will be for Ben. We'll go to the races."

My first reaction was joy, which he noted. Fast on joy's heels came a sort of devastation that I couldn't hope to be riding there, but I let only the joy show, I think.

"We'll go in the Range Rover," my father said decisively. "And Polly will come with us, won't you, Poll?"

Polly said she would love to. We drank the coffee, my father finally as calm as he'd achieved during this whole strange week. Polly

went out to retrieve her car and drive home, and my father and I, bolting everything securely, climbed the steep little staircase and slept undisturbed until Saturday morning.

MERVYN leaned in heavy arrogance on the bell at breakfast time and of course frowned over the change of destination. How did George hope to be successful if he neglected the door-to-door persuasion routine, which was of paramount importance? The Dorset County racecourse, sin of sins, was outside the voting district.

Never mind, my father soothed him. The many Hoopwestern voters who went to the races might approve.

Mervyn, unconvinced, shut his mouth grimly for half an hour, but as the day expanded, he decided to salvage at least crumbs from what he considered the ruins of a canvassing opportunity and got busy on the telephone, with the result that we were invited to lunch with the racecourse stewards. Mervyn, from long experience, knew everyone of influence in the county.

He blamed me, of course, for the switch. His disappointments, I thought, were just too bad. In his life's terms, success lay in getting his candidate elected. Mervyn was not about to ruin his own reputation as agent out of tetchiness with Juliards, father or son.

The chilly atmosphere in the office was lightened by an unexpected visit from the woman who ran the charity shop next door. She and Mervyn knew each other well, but she was fascinated to meet the new candidate, she said. She had seen us come and go; she wanted to shake hands with George; she wondered if we would like a homemade apple pie.

She put her offering on my father's desk.

"Kind of you, Amy," Mervyn said.

Amy was an apologetic, unassuming middle-aged widow (Polly said) who received gifts of unwanted junk, spruced them up a bit to sell, and would never have dipped into the till before passing on the proceeds to the charity that maintained her. She was fluffy, honest, kind, and talkative. It was easy not to listen to every word, but she did grab our attention at one point.

"Someone broke a pane of glass in our window on Wednesday night, and I've had a terrible job getting it mended." She told us at length how she'd managed it. "A policeman called, you know, and asked if the window had been broken by a rifle bullet, but I said of course not, I clean the floor first thing when I arrive every morning. Anyway, of course I didn't find a bullet. I told the policeman—Joe it was, whose mother drives a school bus—and he came in for a look round and made a note or two. I saw it in the paper about someone shooting at Mr. Juliard. You never feel safe these days, do you? And then, just now when I was dusting an old whatnot that I can't seem to sell, I came to this bump, and I pulled it out, and I wonder if this was what Joe was looking for. So do you think I should tell him?"

She plunged a hand into a pocket in her droopy cardigan and put down on the desk, beside the apple pie, a squashed piece of metal that had certainly flown at high speed from a .22 rifle.

"I do think," my father said carefully, "that you should tell your friend Joe, whose mother drives a school bus, that you've found the little lump of metal stuck in a whatnot."

"Do you, really?" Amy picked up the bullet and squinted at it. "All right, then," she said cheerfully, putting the prize back in her pocket. "I was sure you would know what I should do."

She invited him to look around her shop, but he sent me instead, and so I found myself staring at an ugly six-foot-high wicker whatnot that had stood near the window and had stopped the slug.

"I call it an étagère these days," Amy said sadly. "But still nobody wants it. I don't suppose you . . . ?"

"No," I said.

I RETRIEVED the Range Rover from its safe haven, picked up my father, and, following Mervyn's ungracious directions, found Polly's unexpectedly grand house in the woods. She sat in the back seat for our journey to the races and, with a touch of glee, detailed a few telephone calls she had made.

"Mr. Anonymous Lover Wyvern," she said, "received a last-

minute invitation to play golf in the county's top pro-am event of the year, an offer he'd have to have been ice to refuse. So off he was due to go with his clubs, and that was *him* out of the way."

"How did you manage it?" my father asked admiringly.

"Inducements," she said darkly. "And shortly afterwards Orinda got invited to the stewards' box at the races."

"That's where we're going!" exclaimed my father.

"You don't say!" Polly teased him. "Benedict," she admonished me, "I'm giving you Orinda without the lover, so don't waste the day."

"But what can he do?" my father protested.

"He knows," Polly said. "How he'll do it I can't tell, but trust your son." She switched her attention back to me. "Orinda knows bugger all about racing. She's going today for the snob value of a duke, who is one of the stewards. You'll have to contend with that. Think you can do it?"

"I don't know," I said a bit helplessly.

"Go for it," she said.

ORINDA was already into lobster mousse with diced cucumber when we reached the stewards' luncheon room, and at our arrival she could do little but choke and recover with sips of wine, patted delicately on the back by the duke at her side.

The duke rose and gave Polly a conspiratorial kiss on the cheek, and I saw how Orinda had been hooked and reeled in.

She wore a white linen suit, with a green silk scarf floating from a black lizard handbag that swung from the back of her chair. Sleek, matte-skinned, her presence easily eclipsed every other woman in the room, especially Polly, who had dressed as usual, as if not sure of the event or the season.

My father shook hands all around, his innate, unmistakable power turning every head his way. "My son, Benedict," he said, introducing me, but it was he who claimed their eyes.

The duke hesitantly said to me, "Haven't I met you before? Haven't you ridden against my son Edward?"

"Yes, sir. At Towcester last Easter. He won."

The duke had a remembering smile. "Nothing like racing, is there? Best thing on earth, Eddie says."

My father looked sharply at my face.

"Best thing," I said.

"Mind you," the duke said to my father, "for all these young men it's only a hobby. Eddie needs a job. Amateurs can't make a living at it. I expect your Benedict knows all that. Sit down, Mr. Juliard. It's an excellent lunch."

He seated my father on the other side of him from Orinda, who had difficulty, with rigid facial muscles, in smiling at her host. Polly and I were seated several places down the lengthy dining table, on the other side from the uncomfortable Orinda, and placidly ate our mousse, which was, as the duke said, excellent.

There was some sort of curried chicken next. As time ran out towards the first race, the duke, looking at his watch, told my father that as chief steward for the day, he (the duke) would have to leave the party in order to carry out his duties. As if by accident, he saw the near panic on Orinda's face at being left without a buffer zone between herself and her beastly usurper, and found an apparently spur-of-the-moment solution.

With a flick of a glance at Polly, who was looking particularly bland, the duke said to Orinda kindly, "Now, Mrs. Nagle, I am truly concerned that you should enjoy our splendid sport of steeplechasing, and as I'll be occupied, I can think of no one better to entrust you to than young Benedict there. He knows all about racing, and he will take you round and show you everything, and we will all meet up here after, say, the second race. So, Benedict"—he spoke to me loudly down the table—"be a good fellow and take Mrs. Nagle down to see the horses in the parade ring. Watch the race with her. Answer her questions, right?"

I said "Yes, sir" faintly, and the duke more or less pushed Orinda into my arms. I sensed her begin to stiffen, but the duke made urging motions towards the door, and as I followed the white linen suit, I caught glimpses of a wide grin on Polly's face.

Orinda marched down the stairs into the open air, and there she stopped dead and said, "This is ridiculous."

"Yes," I said.

"What do you mean, 'yes'?"

"I mean, you're not going to listen to me, because you hate my father, which is pretty unreasonable, but I'd probably feel the same way, so if you like, I'll just leave you here and go and look at the horses, which is actually what I want to do anyhow."

She said irritably, "I'm old enough to be your mother."

"Easily," I said. Hardly tactful.

In spite of her fury, she almost laughed. "You're supposed to say I couldn't be."

"Sorry."

"Mervyn says you're only seventeen."

"I'll be eighteen in two weeks."

"What will I do if you just dump me here?"

"Well," I said, "I won't dump you. But if you want me to vanish, round that corner you'll find the parade ring, where the horses walk before the race so that everyone can see what they're putting their money on."

"What's going to win?"

I smiled at her with real goodwill. "If I knew, I'd be rich."

"And if you were rich?"

"I'd buy a string of racehorses and ride them."

I hadn't expected the question, and the answer I'd given came straight from the honesty of childhood.

Orinda said formally, "I'd be grateful if you'd accompany me to the parade ring."

I nodded as if she were conceding nothing, and steered her to where the horses plodded around the ring, the sun shining on their coats, the smell and sound of them piercing my senses, setting up in me such an acute sense of loss that I wished myself anywhere on earth but on a racecourse.

"What's the matter?" Orinda said.

"Nothing."

"That's not true."

She had given me a perfect opening for what I wanted to say, but I miserably shrank from it. I hadn't expected to feel so grindingly forlorn, an exile looking through a glass barrier at a life denied him.

I found a place for us to stand against the rails of the parade ring, and I gave her my race card, as she had left her own upstairs.

"What do all these figures mean?" she asked, scratchily pointing to the card. "It's all Greek to me."

"They tell you the horse's age and how much weight he's carrying in the race. The small figures tell you his results in the last races he's run in. F means fell, and P means he pulled up and didn't finish."

"Oh." She read aloud the conditions of entry to the first race, a two-and-a-half-mile hurdle race for novices. "A race for four-year-olds and upwards, which at the start of the season have not won a hurdle race. But if they *have* won a hurdle race, they are to carry a 7-lb. penalty." She looked up, disliking me. "What's a 7-lb. penalty?"

"Extra weight. Most often thin sheets of lead carried in pockets in the weight cloth under the number cloth and saddle." I explained that a jockey had to carry the weight allotted to his horse. "You get weighed before and after a race."

"Yes, yes. I'm not totally ignorant."

She turned the pages of the card, looking forward. "In almost every race a horse carries a penalty if it's won recently. What's the heaviest penalty you can get?"

I said, "I don't think there's any set limit, but in practice a 10-lb. penalty is the most a horse will be faced with. If he had to carry more than ten pounds extra, he almost certainly wouldn't win, so the trainer wouldn't run him."

"But you *could* win with a 10-lb. penalty?"

"Yes, just about. It depends how strong the horse is."

She wanted me to go with her to the betting window, where she backed a horse that had won on the first day of the season and earned himself an extra seven pounds of lead. "He must be the best," she said.

Almost as tall as I was, Orinda walked a pace ahead of me as if it

were natural to her to have her escort in attendance. She was used to being looked at, and her clothes drew admiration, even if more geared to Ascot than a meeting in rural far-from-all-crowds Dorset.

We stood on the steps of the grandstand to watch the race. Orinda's choice finished fourth. She tore her betting ticket across and let the pieces flutter to the ground, like a seasoned loser.

"I don't see much fun in this." She looked around at a host of people studying race cards. "What do you do if it rains?"

The simple answer was "Get wet," but it would hardly have pleased her. "People come to see the horses as much as to gamble," I said. "I mean, horses are marvelous."

She gave me a pitying stare and said that after the following race she would return to the stewards' room to thank the duke for his hospitality, and then she would leave. She couldn't see the fascination that jump racing held for everyone.

I said, "I can't see what fascination politics has for my father, but for him now it's his whole life."

We were walking back towards the parade ring. She stopped abruptly and faced me with frank hostility.

"Your father," she said acidly, biting off each word as if she could crunch them to splinters of glass, "has stolen my purpose in life. It is *I* who was supposed to be fighting this election, and I'd have won it, too, which is more than your precious father will do for all his machismo."

"He didn't know you existed," I said. "He was sent by the central party in Westminster to fight the by-election, if he could get selected. He didn't set out to replace you personally."

She demanded, "How do you know?"

"He told me. He respects the way you feel. And if he had you on his side, maybe you could be a good team. Everyone here says how outstanding you are."

She made no comment, angry or otherwise, but began as before to study her race card.

After a bit she said, "What your father wants is power."

"Yes." I paused. "Do you?"

"Of course."

Power stalked past us in the muscular rumps of fully grown steeplechasers, animals capable of covering ground at thirty miles an hour or more for distances of four and a half miles: the length and speed of the Grand National. No animal on earth could better a racehorse for stamina and speed. That power—*that* was power for me. To share it, guide it, jump with it. Give me that power!

"Usher Rudd," Orinda said, "told my friend Alderney Wyvern that George Juliard is not only lying about your being his legitimate son but maintains you are his catamite."

"His what?" If I sounded bewildered, it was because I was. "What's a—a cat of mice?"

"A catamite is a boy . . . a prostitute boy lover."

I wasn't so much outraged as astonished. In fact, I laughed.

"Usher Rudd," Orinda said warningly, "is a tireless researcher. Don't take him lightly."

"But I thought Paul Bethune was his sleaze target."

"Anyone is," Orinda said. "He makes up lies. He likes to destroy people. He'll do it for money if he can, but if there's no money in it, he'll do it for pleasure. He's a butterfly-wing puller. Are you George Juliard's legitimate son?"

"I look like him a bit."

She nodded.

"And he did marry my mother—in front of a lot of witnesses." Disapproving witnesses, but never mind.

The news seemed not to please her. "I suppose," I said, "that you would prefer Usher Rudd to be right? Then you could have got rid of my father?"

"Alderney Wyvern says it will take more than an Usher Rudd fabrication. It's a matter of finding a strong lever."

She sounded fiercely bitter. Whatever Polly thought of my ability to understand unhappiness and release it, I felt lost in the maze of Orinda's implacable grievances against my father.

I took her to watch the second race from near one of the fences, to give her at least some sensation of the speed involved. Her high

heels tended to dig into the turf and stick, making walking difficult. She was, though, impressed by the noise and energy of the half-ton horses soaring over the big black birch fence, and she could hear the jockeys shouting to each other and to their mounts, could see the straining legs in white breeches and the brilliant colors of the silks in the August sun. And whether she wanted me to know it or not, she suddenly understood why this sort of racing fascinated the duke and everyone else who had made the journey to the racecourse.

When the horses had surged past us, while the very air still vibrated with their passage, I said, "I do understand what you feel about having been passed over by the selectors."

Orinda said unkindly, "You can't possibly. You're too young."

Almost in desperation I said, "You've lost what you most wanted, and it's near to unbearable. You were looking forward to a sort of life that would be a joy every day, that would fulfill you and give you inner power to achieve your best dreams, and it's been snatched away. You've been told you can't have it. The pain of it's brutal. Believe me, I do know."

She stared, the green eyes wide.

"You don't have to be old," I said. "You can feel it if you're only six and you passionately want a pony and you've nowhere to keep it and it's not sensible to start with. And I—" I swallowed. I swept an arm to the black fence, to the whole wide racecourse. "I wanted *this*. I've wanted to be a jockey for as long as I can remember. I've grown up in the belief that this would be my life. I've grown up feeling warm and certain of my future, and, well, this week it's been snatched away from me. I've been told I can't live this life, I'm not good enough, I haven't the spark to be the jockey I want to be. The trainer I was riding for told me to leave. My father says he'll pay for me to go to university but not for me to waste my time riding in races when I'm not going to be brilliant. It didn't really sink in. I didn't know how absolutely *awful* it would be until I came here today. But I'd like to scream, actually, and roll on the ground, and if you think you have to be old enough to be my mother to feel as you do, well, you're wrong."

CHAPTER 4

AT THE end of the afternoon I glumly drove the Range Rover back to Polly's house in the woods, feeling that I'd wasted all her planning and not only failed to profit from an unrepeatable opportunity but had positively made things worse.

By the time Orinda and I had recrossed the course (her heels were sticking worse than ever) and regained the stewards' room, the duke had disappeared again. Orinda watched the third race from the viewing balcony of the luncheon room, her back relentlessly turned towards me. A horse carrying a 7-lb. penalty won the race. Orinda hadn't backed it.

When the duke returned, she thanked him charmingly for his hospitality and left. She said nothing to my father or to Polly or to myself, ignoring our existence. I survived the last three races wishing I were smaller and richer.

When Polly invited us into her house, my father accepted at once.

"Cheer up," he commanded to my silent reluctance. "Say something. You haven't said anything for hours."

"All right. Orinda said Usher Rudd wants to know if I'm your catamite."

My father spluttered into the gin that Polly had poured him.

Polly said, "What's a catamite?" But my father knew.

I said, "Usher Rudd's trying to prove I'm not your son. If you have a marriage certificate, put it in a bank vault."

"And your birth certificate, where's that?"

"With my stuff at Mrs. Wells's."

He frowned. My things had not arrived yet. He borrowed Polly's phone and called my ex-landlady. "She's packed everything," he re-

ported, "but the carriers I ordered haven't turned up. I'll see to it again on Monday."

"My bicycle is at the stables."

He caught some sense of the wreck he'd made of my aspirations, but I also saw quite clearly that he still expected me to face reality thoroughly and grow up.

"Tough it out," he said.

Polly looked from one of us to the other and said, "The boy's doing his best for you, George."

Leaving her house, I drove the Range Rover back to Hoopwestern and disembarked my parent at a church hall, where he was due to meet the small army of volunteers working for him throughout the area. The volunteers had brought their families and also tea, beer, wine, and cake to sustain them, and had my father's inexhaustible enthusiasm to energize them.

"My son . . . this is my son." He presented me over and over again, and I shook hands and smiled and smiled and chatted up old ladies and talked football with shaky knowledge and racing with piercing regret.

Three more weeks of it. The campaign at that point seemed like purgatory. But I'd said I would do it, and I would.

At good-bye time I collected the Range Rover from where I'd parked it and was as sure as possible that no one had tampered with it that evening. Foster Fordham had given me simple instructions on the telephone. "Always take with you a carton of dishwasher powder in a box with a spout. When you park the vehicle, sprinkle a thin line of powder on the ground from behind each front wheel back to the rear wheel. If anyone has wriggled under the vehicle in your absence, the powder will tell you."

I'd followed his instructions faithfully, but our sump-plug merchant had tried no other tricks. I ferried my father safely back to headquarters and left him there with Mervyn, the two of them endlessly discussing tactics, while I housed the Range Rover in its lockup and ran a pizza to earth in the local take-away.

Mervyn and my father absentmindedly ate half of it. Mervyn laid

out dozens of stickers and leaflets in piles, ready for distribution. Yes, he said when I asked him, *of course* by-elections were wildly exciting, they were the peaks in his busy life. And there were the final touches to be arranged for the fund-raising fete organized for next week—such a pity Orinda wasn't in charge of it this time.

I yawned and climbed the narrow stairs, leaving my two elders to lock up. And I woke in the night to a strong smell of smoke.

Smoke.

I sat bolt upright in bed. Without much more than instinct I disentangled my legs from the sheets and violently shook the unconscious lump on the neighboring mattress, yelling, "We're on fire," as I leaped to the half-open door to see if what I said was actually, devastatingly true.

It was. Down the stairs there were fierce leaping flames, devouring and roaring. Smoke funneled up in growing billows. Ahead of me the sitting room blazed yellow.

Gasping for breath in the smoke, I swiveled fast on one foot and jumped into the bathroom. I swept a large towel into the toilet bowl, and whisking the sopping towel into the bedroom, I closed the door against the smoke and laid the towel along the bottom of the door in a speed near to frenzy.

"The window," I yelled. "The bloody window's stuck."

The window was stuck shut with layers of paint and had been annoying my father for days. We were both wearing only underpants, and the air was growing hot. He smoothly picked up the single bedroom chair and smashed it against the window. Glass broke, but the panes were small and the wooden frames barely cracked. We were above the bay windows facing the square. A second smash with the chair burst through the sticky layers of old paint and swung open both sides of the window. But underneath, the fire had already eaten through the bay window's roof and was shooting up the wall.

The charity shop next door blazed also with manic energy. The fire had reached the roof, with scarlet and gold sparks shooting into the sky above our heads. I scrambled to the door, thinking the stairs

the only way out after all, but even if the wet towel was still holding back the worst of the smoke, it was useless against flame. The doorknob was now too hot to touch.

I shouted with fierceness, "We're burning. The door's on fire."

My father stared at me across the room. "We'll have to jump."

He put the damaged chair against the window and motioned me to climb up and leap out as far as I could. There were people now in the square and voices yelling, and the raucous siren of the fire engine coming nearer.

"Hurry," my father said. "Jump."

I stood on the chair and held on to the window frame. The paint on it scorched my hands.

"Jump!"

I couldn't believe it. He was struggling into shirt and trousers and zipping up his fly.

"Go on. *Jump!*"

I put a bare foot on the frame, pulled myself up, and leaped out with every scrap of muscle power and desperation. I sailed through the flames from the bay window and missed the burning edge of it by terrifying inches and crashed down onto the dark cobbled ground with a head-stunning impact. I felt hands grabbing me to pull me away from the fire, and I was choking with smoke and winded. I had no strength. Sat on the ground. Couldn't even speak.

Voices were screaming to my father to jump, and voices were screaming not to jump, to wait for the bellowing fire engine now charging across the square, spilling people in yellow helmets. He was standing on the chair, silhouetted in the window, with a reddish glow behind him. There was an outburst of bright, sunlike flame in the room at his back, and he stood on the window frame and threw himself out as I had done, flung himself through the climbing fire of the windows below into the darkness beyond, knowing he might break his neck and smash his skull.

A camera flashed.

Two men in yellow suits, like moon suits, were sprinting, heavy-gloved hands outstretched, dragging a circular trampoline thing for

catching jumpers. No time to position it. They simply ran, and my father crashed down into them, all the figures sprawling, arms and legs flying. People crowded to help them and hid the tangle from my sight, but my father's legs had been moving with life, and he had shoes on, which he hadn't had upstairs.

I was covered in smoky dirt and bleeding from cobble-induced scrapes and grazes, and I had tears running down my face, although I didn't know I was crying. I was dazed and coughing and had blisters forming on my fingers and feet, but none of it mattered. Noise and confusion filled my head. I'd aimed to keep my father safe from danger, and I hadn't even *contemplated* a smoke alarm.

His voice said, "Ben?"

I looked up woozily. He was standing above me; he was *smiling.* How could he?

Men in yellow suits unrolled hoses and poured gallons from the tanker onto the bow fronts. There was steam and smoke and unquenched flame, and there were people putting a red blanket around my shoulders and telling me not to worry. I wasn't sure what I didn't have to worry about. I wasn't actually *sure* of anything.

"Ben," my father said, "you're concussed. Can you hear me?"

"No smoke alarm. My fault."

"Ben!" He shook me. People told him not to.

"I'll get you elected," I said.

Familiar faces loomed into my orbit and went away again. Amy was there, wringing her hands and weeping. Amy crying for charity gifts lost to ashes, the ugly whatnot gone forever. What's a whatnot, Amy? An étagère, you know, a set of little shelves for an odd corner, bearing plates and photographs and whatnot.

And bullets?

"Oh, dear," she said. "I left the bullet in my cardigan in the shop, and now I've lost it, but never mind."

Mrs. Leonard Kitchens patted my shoulder reassuringly. "Don't you worry, boy. There was nothing in those old shops but junk and paper. Leaflets. My Leonard's here somewhere. Have you seen him? Likes a good fire, does my Leonard."

Usher Rudd stalked his prey, framing his picture, stepping back and clicking. He grinned over my blanket, took time to focus, aimed his lens. Flash.

Mervyn wrung his hands over the lost heaps of JULIARDs. He'd barely been home half an hour before someone had phoned to warn him the charity shop was on fire. Crystal Harley knelt beside me, worriedly dabbing bloody trickles with tissues.

Paul and Isobel Bethune drove into the pedestrian-only precinct. Emergencies made new rules, the local councillor said, bustling towards my father, presenting a surface of urgent concern for him and with hail-fellow greetings for the firemen.

Isobel asked me weakly if I was all right.

"Of course he's not," Crystal snapped. "He jumped through fire and hit the ground. What do you expect?"

"And, er, his father?"

"His father will win the seat," Crystal said.

God bless politics, I thought.

Water plumed and sizzled on the flames and ran out of the building again, soaking the cobbles. I and my red blanket dripped and chilled. The yellow helmets aimed their hoses at the still dark buildings next to the blazing shops, and in time the ravaging tongues of fire ran out of fuel and began to diminish, to whisper instead of roar, so that what fell from the sky into the square was no longer sparks but hot, clinging ash and what assaulted the senses was the acrid after-smell of burning.

Someone fetched the doctor who had seen to my father's ankle three days earlier. He peered into my eyes with bright lights and into my ears and felt the bump on my head and bound up blisters in huge padded dressings, and he agreed with my father that all a healthy boy needed was to see him in the morning. My father solved the interim by enlisting the sympathy of the manager of The Sleeping Dragon, who gave us a bedroom and whose wife found me some clothes.

"You poor dears . . . you poor dears." She mothered us, kind, but enjoying it, and both she and her husband happily welcomed

the reporters from the London dailies who thronged through the doors the next day.

Usher Rudd's admittedly brilliant photograph of my father in mid-leap with the flaming window behind him made the front pages of every major paper in the land, and hot on the heels of the factual news came comment and criticism.

People will always tell you what you should have done. People will tell you what *they* would have done if they had woken in the night with fire underneath them. People will say that absolutely the first thing to do was call the fire brigade, and no one could be bothered to say, How do I call the brigade when the only telephone is downstairs, surrounded by flames?

Everyone can think logically afterwards, but in the heat and the smell and the danger, analytical reasoning is more or less out of the question. Perhaps we should have thrown the mattresses out of the window as a way of breaking our fall. Perhaps, if we could have got them through the window.

Don't waste time with clothes, they'll tell you—whoever "they" are. But I don't think my father ever regretted the near-to-lethal seconds he spent in putting on his shirt and trousers. He knew in some way that a photograph of him jumping half naked from the flames would haunt his whole career. He knew, even in that fraught moment, that an orderly presentation was everything. Not even the worst that Usher Rudd could dredge up in the future ever showed George Juliard as anything but a fast-thinking headliner who was at his very best—*who put his shoes on*—in a crisis.

THE police investigation sauntered upwards from Joe, whose mother drove a school bus, to higher ranks at county level, but the firefighters couldn't swear the two bow fronts had been torched, and no one found a .22 rifle to match the lost-again bullet, and Foster Fordham's report on wax in the Range Rover's sump was judged inconclusive. George Juliard might have been the target of three attempts on his candidature, if not on his life, but again he might not. There were no obvious suspects.

In the August doldrums for news, London editors gave the puzzle two full days of wide coverage. George Juliard shone on television nationwide. Every voter knew who Juliard was.

While my father dealt with publicity people and Mervyn Teck drove around like an agitated bluebottle searching for substitute headquarters, I spent most of the Sunday sitting in an armchair by the window of our Sleeping Dragon room, letting bruises and grazes heal and looking across the square at the burned-out building opposite. From somewhere up here, I thought, from somewhere among the many hanging baskets of geraniums (her Leonard, the nurseryman, had designed them, Mrs. Kitchens had told me with pride), from among little blue flowers whose name I didn't know and the fluffy white flowers that rounded the bright displays decorating the long frontage of The Sleeping Dragon, from somewhere up here someone had aimed a .22 rifle at my father.

The marksman probably hadn't been in this room given to us, which was much farther along towards the town hall than the door of the hotel from which we'd walked. I thought it unlikely that a ricochet from where I sat would have hit the charity shop. At one point, shuffling on the padded blisters, I explored the length of the hotel's upper floor, coming to a little lounge area that I reckoned lay directly above the front hall and main door, accessible to the world. Straight ahead through the window from there was the unmarked path I'd taken with my father across the cobbles.

Anyone—*anyone*—could have stood among the floor-length curtains, opened the window, rested the barrel of a .22 on the windowsill and shot through the geraniums.

By Monday morning Mervyn had rented an empty shop in a side street and borrowed a desk and some folding chairs. The campaign hiccupped for two days while he cajoled his friendly neighborhood printer into replacement leaflet-and-poster production at grand-prix speed and near-to-cost prices, but by late Tuesday the indefatigable witches, Faith, Marge, and Lavender, had turned the empty shop into a working office complete with teapot and mobile phone. And on Wednesday a miracle happened.

Mervyn had taped a new large-scale map onto the wall and was pointing out to me the roads I should drive along (feet okay by now) for Faith and Lavender to ring as yet untroubled doorbells. My father had gone to London on Wednesday morning. There were just Mervyn, Crystal, Faith, Marge, Lavender, and me in the makeshift office, the bunch of us putting the best face possible on the lack of computer, copier, and fax.

Orinda walked in.

All business stopped.

She wore pale citrus green: pants, jacket, and headband. Gold chains. She carried, besides the black lizard handbag, a substantial roll of papers. She looked around the room, smiled faintly, and fixed her gaze on me.

"I want to talk to you," she said calmly. "Outside."

I followed where she led. We stood on the sidewalk in the sun, with shoppers passing by.

"Since Saturday," she announced, "I have been considering things. On Sunday morning, at half past eight or so, a newspaperman appeared at my house in an invasive procedure I believe is called doorstepping."

I nodded faintly.

"He asked if I was glad or sorry that you hadn't been burned to death. You and your father, that is."

"Oh."

"The journalist wanted to know my opinion of information that close-to-death attacks had been made on George Juliard so that he would retire from the candidacy, clearing the way for my return." She paused, studying my face. "That thought isn't new to you."

"No, but I don't think you did it."

"Why not?"

"You're hurt. You're furious. But you wouldn't murder."

"When will you be eighteen?"

"In ten days."

"Then consider this a coming-of-age present." She thrust the roll of papers into my hands. "This is for you. It is because of you—"

She stopped abruptly, swallowing. "Use it in any way you like."

With curiosity I unrolled the stiff sheets, having to hold them wide to prevent them rolling up again. The top one, in very large capital letters, read ORINDA NAGLE SAYS VOTE FOR JULIARD.

My mouth, I know, fell open.

"There are ten of them," she said simply. "I had them printed this morning. They'll print dozens if you like."

"Orinda . . ." I was all but speechless.

"You showed me at the races—" She stopped again. "You're so very young, but you showed me it's possible to bear an unbearable disappointment. You made me look into myself. Anyway, I will *not* have people thinking I would set fire to our old headquarters in order to get rid of your father, so I'll join him. I'll support him from now on in every way. I should never have listened to those people who told me he had robbed me. To be really truthful, I don't know that I wasn't *relieved* not to be forced to go to Westminster, but I do like working in the constituency and that's what hurts most, that the people I've worked so hard for passed me over."

She stopped talking and looked at me in a sort of desperation to see if I could possibly understand, and I understood so well that I leaned forward impulsively and kissed her on the cheek.

She followed me into the office and, after delivering her news, enjoyed a hugging session with Mervyn and an ambiguous welcome from the three witches.

"Where are you canvassing today, Mervyn?" Orinda asked, and he showed her the map, with the unexpected result that when I drove the Range Rover around Hoopwestern that morning, I had on board Mervyn, Orinda, Faith, and Lavender, and Orinda's roll of commitment flattened out as placards.

As Mervyn had telephoned the editor of the *Gazette,* we were greeted in the parking lot behind the shop by a hastily assembled crowd, by the editorial writer of the *Gazette,* and by a television cameraman. Orinda flirted with his lens (or with him—much the same thing) and told everyone prettily that George Juliard, undoubtedly on the brink of becoming a nationally acclaimed politi-

cian, was the best possible substitute for her beloved Dennis, who had dedicated his life to the good citizens of this glorious part of Dorset.

Applause, applause. She appeared in the sitting rooms of Hoopwestern on the lunchtime television news against only slightly orchestrated cheers.

By the time my father returned on the train from London, he'd heard of Orinda's media conference. At another meeting of the faithful that evening he embraced her in a warm hug (reciprocated) that would have been unthinkable a day earlier.

Not everyone was pleased. Orinda's shadow, Anonymous Lover Wyvern, followed her around like thunder. She, dressed in blackberry-colored satin and glowing with generosity and virtue, kept giving him inquiring looks as if unsure of the source of his dudgeon. She didn't seem to realize, as I did, that in dumping her anger at not being selected, she had in some way lessened his status. He had been Dennis Nagle's best friend, but Orinda was leaving her Dennis behind.

Dearest Polly, to my surprise, positively scowled, even though she had herself delivered Orinda to her change of heart.

"I didn't count on such a radical about-face," Polly complained. "She's cast herself in the ongoing role of constituency wife! There's no doubt she was good at it, but she *isn't* George's wife, and she can't surely imagine she can go on opening fetes and things. Whatever did you say to her at the races?"

I said, "I thought you wanted her on my father's side. Get him into Parliament. Then he'll deal with Orinda and everything else. It was you, Dearest Polly, who said I look into people's minds."

She asked in some alarm, "Do you see into mine?"

"Sort of."

She laughed uneasily, but I saw nothing but good.

One could say the opposite about Leonard Kitchens. I had come to notice that the tilt of his prominent mustache acted like a weather vane, signaling the direction of his feelings. The upward thrust that evening was combative and self-important, a combina-

tion looking for a fight. Bulky Mrs. Kitchens (in large pink flowers printed on dark blue) followed Leonard's progress around the meeting with anxiety for a while and then made a straight line to my side.

"Do something," she hissed into my ear. "Tell Orinda to leave my Leonard alone."

It seemed to me that it was the other way around, as Leonard's mustache vibrated by Orinda's neck, but on Mrs. Kitchens's prompting, I went over to hear Leonard's whining drift.

"I would do *anything* for you, Orinda, you know I would. But you're joining the enemy, and I can't bear to see him slobbering all over you. It's disgusting."

"Wake up, Leonard," Orinda said lightly, not seeing the seething lava below the faintly ridiculous exterior. "It's a new world."

The undercurrents might tug and eddy, but Orinda had definitely unified the party behind Juliard. Yet as the days went by, one could see that Orinda's flip-flop had most impact in Hoopwestern itself and not very much in the villages dotting the maps. Cheers greeted her near home, but her arrival to canvass in, say, Middle Lampfield—population 637—was more likely to be greeted with a polite "Oo? Aah" in a Dorset accent and a swift return to "Zoomerzet" cider.

More local draft cider flowed down the constituency throats than babies' formula, and my father's head for the frothy fruit of the apple earned him approval. We rolled every day at lunchtime from pub to pub to pub (I drove), and I got used to hearing the verdict. "A good chap, your father. He understands what we need in the countryside. That Bethune, he's a *town* councillor, and you know what we think of them lot. Thumbs down."

My father made them laugh. He knew the price of hay. They would have followed him to the South Pole.

Orinda didn't like cider, and she didn't like pubs. My father and I therefore spent several days soapboxing the outlying villages in the Range Rover, seeing to it, as my father said, that not a voter was left unturned.

The following week it was Orinda who nearly died.

CHAPTER 5

ON THE Tuesday of the last full week of canvassing, my possessions and bicycle finally arrived by carrier from Mrs. Wells's.

Up in our room, my father picked with curiosity through the meager debris of my life: two trophies for winning amateur steeplechases the previous Easter, photographs of me on horses and skis, photos from school with me sitting in a team lineup—this one for target shooting—with the captain hugging a cup. There were books on mathematics and racing biographies. Also clothes, but not many, as to my dismay I was still growing.

My father extracted my passport, my birth certificate, and the photograph of his wedding to my mother. He took the picture out of its frame, and after looking at it for several long minutes, he ran his finger over her face and sighed deeply, and it was the only time I'd known him to show any emotion about his loss.

I said incautiously, "Do you remember her? If she walked into the room now, would you know her?"

He gave me a look of such bleakness that I realized I'd asked a question of unforgivable intrusion, but after a pause all he said was, "You never forget your first."

I swallowed.

He said, "Have you had your first?"

I felt numb, embarrassed, but in the end I said truthfully, "No."

He nodded. It was a moment of almost unbearable intimacy, the first ever between us, but he remained totally calm and matter-of-fact. He sorted through some papers he had brought in a briefcase from his trip to London, put my own identifications in the case, snapped shut the locks, and announced that we were going to call on the Hoopwestern *Gazette.*

We called, in fact, on the editor, who was a man in shirtsleeves, harassed, middle-aged, and, from the tone of his front pages, censorious. He stood up from his desk as we approached.

"Mr. Samson Frazer," my father said, calling him by name. "I have some things for you to see."

He unlatched the briefcase and opened it, taking out each paper and putting it down in front of the editor. "My marriage certificate. My son's birth certificate. Our passports. This photograph of my wife and myself taken outside the registry office after our wedding. On the back"—he turned the picture over—"you will see the photographer's name and copyright and date. Here also is my wife's death certificate. She died of complications after the birth of our son. This son, Benedict, my only child."

The editor gave me a swift glance, as if he hadn't until that point taken note of my existence.

"You employ a person called Usher Rudd," my father said. "He seems to be trying to cast doubt on my son's identity and legitimacy. I'm told he has made scurrilous insinuations."

Samson Frazer found nothing to say.

"If I have to," my father said, "I will send hair samples for DNA testing. My own hair, my son's, and some hair from my wife, which she gave me in a locket. I hope you will carefully consider what I've said and what I've shown you." He began methodically replacing the certificates in the briefcase. "Because I assure you," he went on pleasantly, "if the Hoopwestern *Gazette* should be so unwise as to cast doubt on my son's origins, I will sue the paper and you personally for defamation and libel." He snapped the locks shut so vigorously that they sounded in themselves like a threat. "You understand?"

The editor plainly did.

"Good," my father said. "If you catch me in sleaze, that will be fair enough. If you try to manufacture it, I'll hang you out by the toes. Good day to you, sir."

He was in high good humor all the way back to the hotel and went upstairs humming.

"What would you say," he suggested, "to a pact between us?"

"What sort of pact?"

He put the briefcase on the table and drew out two sheets of plain paper. "I've been thinking," he said, "of making you a promise, and I want you to make the same promise in return. We both know how vulnerable one is to people like Usher Rudd."

My father grinned. "The promise I'll make is not to give him, or anyone like him, any grounds ever for messy publicity. I'll be dead boring. There will be no kiss-and-tell bimbos and no illicit payment for favors and no cheating on tax and no nasty drugs."

I smiled easily.

"Yes," he said, "but I want *you* to make the same promise to *me*. I want you to promise me that if I get elected, you'll do nothing throughout my political career that can get me discredited or sacked or disgraced in any way."

"But I wouldn't," I protested.

"It's easy to say that now while you're young, but you'll find life's full of terrible temptations." He shook his head. "I want us both to write it down. I want you to be able to see and remember what you promised." He paused, clicking a ballpoint pen while he thought; then he wrote very quickly on one sheet of paper, signed his name, and pushed the paper over for me to read.

It said, "I will cause no scandal, nor will I perform any shameful or illegal act."

Wow, I thought. I said, not wanting this to get too serious, "It's a bit comprehensive, isn't it?"

"It's not worth doing otherwise. But you can write your own version. Write what you're comfortable with."

I had no sense of binding myself irrevocably to sainthood.

I wrote, "I'll do nothing that could embarrass my father's political career or drag his name in the dust. I'll do my best to keep him safe from any sort of attack." I signed my name lightheartedly and gave him the page. "Will that do?"

He read it, smiling. "It'll do."

He folded both pages together, then picked up the wedding photograph and positioned it facedown on the glass in its frame. He

then put both of the signed pacts on the photo and replaced the back of the frame, fastening its clips.

"There you are," he said, turning the frame faceup. "Every time you look at your mother and me, you'll remember the promises behind the photo. Couldn't be simpler."

He stood the picture on the table. "Right. Then let's get on with this election."

We went to the new basic headquarters to collect Mervyn, pamphlets, Faith and Lavender, and start a door-to-door morning around three Hoopwestern housing estates. Mervyn for once seemed content in his world. His day shone even brighter when Orinda arrived, declaring her readiness for the fray, in neat slacks and jacket, light orange-scarlet in color. Therefore six of us squeezed into the Range Rover, leaving behind Crystal and Marge.

Only eight days after this one, I thought, and it will be over.

I drove mechanically, stopping wherever Mervyn dictated. Babies got kissed. My father came across a clutch of lightbulb factory shift workers, and learned about tungsten filaments. I chatted up a coffee morning of old ladies who weren't satisfied until my parent shook their hands. Mervyn alerted the streets to our presence, and Faith and Lavender left no doorbell unrung. When we drove out of the last of the estates, many a window now proclaimed JULIARD. One could not but hope.

Mervyn and my father decided on one more long street, this time of varied and slightly more prosperous-looking houses. I, by this time, had had enough door-to-dooring to last me several lifetimes, but as always the others seemed to have an indefatigable appetite. Orinda alone seemed uneasy and withdrawn, not her usual extravagant self, and while she and I waited together beside the Range Rover for the others to finish galvanizing a retirement home, I asked her what was the matter.

She said, "Do you see that white BMW there, along the road?"

"Yes." I frowned. "I saw it earlier, in one of the housing estates."

"He's following us. It's Alderney Wyvern."

I asked, astonished, "Why on earth should he follow us?"

It was Orinda then who frowned. "He's still furious with me for supporting your father."

"Well . . . I'd noticed. But why, exactly?"

"Dennis used to do everything Alderney said. I mean, Alderney actually was how Dennis got advancement. Alderney would tell him what to say. He's very clever politically."

"Why doesn't he find a parliamentary seat for himself?"

"He says he doesn't want to." She paused. "To be frank, he isn't easy to understand. But I know he expected me to retain the seat as Dennis's widow, and he worked on people like that creepy Leonard Kitchens to make sure I was selected. And then out of the blue the central party decided they wanted George Juliard in Parliament, so he came and dazzled the selectors, who always listen to Polly, as a matter of course, and she fell for him like a ton of bricks. Anyway, I sometimes think that that's the sort of power Alderney really wants, to be able to pull the levers behind the scenes."

It seemed to me a wacky notion. I still had a lot to learn.

"So now that I've joined your father," Orinda said, "I'm not listening to Alderney as much. I used to do everything he suggested. We always did, Dennis and I, because Alderney would tell us such and such a thing would happen on the political scene, and mostly he was right, and now I'm out with your father so much. . . . You'll laugh, but I almost think he's jealous!"

I didn't laugh. I'd seen my father's powerful effect on every female in Hoopwestern. It wouldn't have surprised me if he'd left a comet tail of jealousy through the constituency.

Alderney Wyvern got out of his car and stood staring at Orinda.

"I'd better go and talk to him," Orinda said.

I said instinctively, "No, don't."

She caught the alarm in my voice and smiled. "I've known him for years."

I hadn't yet come across the adult, grossly matured variety of jealousy, only the impotent rage of adolescence, but I felt intuitively that a great—and disturbing—change had taken place in A. L. Wyvern. He had been by his own choice self-effacing on every oc-

casion I'd seen him: quiet, self-contained, behaving as if he didn't want to be noticed. All that had gone. The stocky figure now seemed heavier, the shoulders hunched, the face visibly tense with menace.

I said to Orinda, "Stay here."

"Don't be silly." She walked confidently towards him in her brave orange-red clothes.

I could hear his voice, low and growling, but not what he said. Her reply was light and teasing. She put out a hand as if to stroke his arm affectionately, and he hit her very hard in the face.

She cried out with shock as much as pain. I ran towards her, and although Wyvern saw me coming, he hit her again, backhanded, across her nose and mouth. She squealed, raising her hands to shield her face, trying at the same time to escape from him, but he clutched the shoulder of her jacket and drew back his fist for a third blow.

She wrenched herself free, stumbling into the roadway.

The residential street that had been so peaceful and empty suddenly seemed filled with a heavy truck that bore down towards Orinda, brakes shrieking, horn blowing in banshee bursts. Orinda tottered blindly as if disoriented. The truck driver swerved, trying to miss her. I threw myself at Orinda in a sort of twisting football tackle, so that she fell half under me onto the hard surface, and the screaming black tires made skid marks an inch from our feet.

Orinda's nose was bleeding, and her eyes were overflowing with pain-induced tears, and beyond that she was dazed and bewildered. I knelt beside her, winded myself and fearful that I'd hurt her. The truck had stopped not far beyond us, and the driver, jumping down from his cab and running towards us, was already rehearsing aggrieved innocence.

"She ran out straight in front of me. I didn't have a chance. It isn't my fault. I couldn't help it. . . ."

Neither Orinda nor I made any reply. It was irrelevant. The person at fault stood on the sidewalk directly across the road from us, glaring and rigid and not coming to our aid.

With breath returning, I asked Orinda if she was all right. Silly question, really, when her nose was bleeding. Her jacket was torn.

One black shoe was off. The careful makeup was smeared, and there was a slack weakness all through her body. I slid an arm under her neck to see if she could sit up, and to my relief she let me help her do that, until she was sitting in the road with her head and her hands on her bent knees.

She said tearfully, trying to wipe blood with her fingers, "Have you got a tissue?"

I hadn't.

"There's one in my bag."

Her handbag, I knew, was in the Range Rover.

The truck driver said, "I missed her. I know I did. It's not my fault she's bleeding."

"No, it's not," I agreed, standing up. "But you're a big strong guy, and you can help by picking up the lady and carrying her to that Range Rover over there—"

"No way," he interrupted. "I'm not getting her blood on me. It's not my fault. She ran straight out in front of me."

"Yes. Okay," I said. "It wasn't your fault. But you did stop, so if you'd help her along to that vehicle, then I'm sure you can carry on with whatever you were doing."

"No police," he said.

"You don't have to call the police to an accident unless someone's been injured, and you didn't injure this lady, as you said."

I bent down to get Orinda to her feet, and she stood up, clutching me. I put my arms around her awkwardly. She was trembling all over. My father would simply have scooped her up and carried her, but apart from my doubt of having adequate strength, I was embarrassed by the difference in our ages. Ridiculous, really. I felt protective, but unsure.

"Oh, come on, missus," the driver said suddenly, picking up her scattered shoe and putting it on for her. "Hold on to my arm."

He offered a rocklike support, and between the two of us Orinda walked unsteadily. In that fashion we reached the Range Rover and installed her in the front passenger seat, where she shakily thanked the driver.

"Hey!" he said suddenly, surveying the highly noticeable vehicle. "Doesn't this motor belong to that politician?"

"Juliard. I'm his son," I said. "This lady that you've helped just now is Mrs. Orinda Nagle, whose husband was the M.P. here before he died."

"Cor! I live in Quindle. They say your father's got no chance, but maybe I'll vote for him now anyway." He positively beamed at Orinda and told her not to worry, and drove off in his truck giving us a smile—a *smile*—and a wave.

Alderney Wyvern all this time had remained as if the soles of his shoes were glued to the ground.

For once, with a real story to record, Usher Rudd and his lens had been missing.

My father, Mervyn, Faith, and Lavender came out from a triumphant conversion of the retirement home and exclaimed in horror at Orinda's blood and distress. The tissue from her handbag had proved inadequate. Her tears by now were of uncomplicated misery, rolling half mopped down her cheeks.

"What happened?" my father demanded of me fiercely. "What have you done?"

Orinda came to my defense. "George, Benedict *helped* me. . . . I can't believe it"—her voice wailed—"Alderney h-h-hit me."

"He *what?*"

We all looked along the road to where Wyvern still pugnaciously stood his ground. My father strode off with purposeful anger towards the visibly unrepentant ex–best friend and challenged him loudly, though we couldn't hear the actual words. Wyvern answered with equal vigor, arms waving.

"Benedict," Orinda begged me, "go and stop them."

It was easy enough for her to say it, but they were both grown men, whereas I . . . Well, I went along there fast and caught my father's arm as he drew back his fist for an infuriated swipe at Wyvern, who was, incredibly, sneering.

My father swung around and shouted at me, raging, "Get out of my bloody way."

"The pact," I yelled at him. "Remember the *pact.* Don't hit him. Father . . . Dad . . . don't hit him."

"What?" The scorching fury went out of his eyes as suddenly as if he were waking up.

"He *wants* you to hit him," I said. I didn't know why I was so certain. It had something to do with the fact that Wyvern had remained on the spot, but it was mostly his body language. He was looking for trouble. He meant all sorts of harm to my father—not least, adverse publicity before polling day.

My father gave me a blank look, then walked past me to go back to the Range Rover. I half turned to follow him but was grabbed and spun round by Wyvern, whose always unsmiling face was now set fast with brutal malice. If he couldn't get what he wanted from the father, he would take it out on the son.

I hadn't learned boxing or karate, but I did have naturally fast reflexes and, thanks to riding and skiing, an instinctive command of balance. I ducked and dodged two sizzling punches to the face that would have laid me out flat if they'd connected, and I simply ran, intent on escape, not on winning any battles.

I could hear Wyvern coming after me and saw my father with renewed fury turning back to my aid. I yelled at him, "Get in the vehicle." He wavered and turned again and marvelously did as I said.

Three steps from the Range Rover I swung around fast to face Wyvern. He sized up the gallery he was playing to—Orinda, my father, Mervyn, Faith, and Lavender—and under the glare of all those eyes he abruptly stopped a bare six paces from me.

The venom in his expression shriveled the saliva in my mouth.

"One day," he said. "I'll get you one day."

He took a few steps backwards, his face smoothing out to its customary flatness; then he turned and walked to his car as if nothing had happened. Easing into the driver's seat, he started the engine and drove collectedly away.

He left a lot of speechlessness in and around the Range Rover.

In the end Mervyn said, "Orinda needs a doctor."

Orinda disagreed. "I need a tissue."

Faith and Lavender between them produced some crumpled white squares. "The police . . . ?" suggested Faith.

"*No,*" Orinda said, and no one argued.

With everyone subdued, I drove back to headquarters, where my father transferred himself and Orinda into her car and set off to her home, with me following to bring him back.

He was silent for the return journey, but as I braked to a halt at the end of it, he said finally, "Orinda thinks you saved her from being run over."

"The truck driver missed us," I explained. "Her eyes were watering. She couldn't see where she was going."

I made as if to get out of the vehicle, but he stopped me.

"Wait." He seemed to be searching for words. He said, "I'm afraid I've let you in for more than I expected."

I half laughed. "It hasn't been boring."

THAT Sunday was my eighteenth birthday. My father, who had commitments in Quindle, had told me he would leave me a birthday card with Crystal, and I was to go along in the morning to collect it. He would return by evening, he said, and we would dine together to celebrate. No political meetings, he said. Just the two of us, with champagne.

When I arrived at the party office at nine, the door was locked, and fifteen minutes passed before Crystal arrived and chattered her way inside. Yes, she agreed, my father had left me a card, and many happy returns and all that. She took an envelope out of the desk and gave it to me, and inside I found a card with a joke on it about growing old, and nothing else. "Yours, Dad," he'd written.

"George said," Crystal told me, "that you are to go out into the street and find a black car with a chauffeur in it. And don't ask me what it's about. George wouldn't tell me. So off you go, then."

"Thanks, Crystal."

I went outside and found the black car a hundred yards away, patiently parked. The chauffeur, without speaking, handed me a white envelope, unaddressed.

The card inside read "Get in the car."

And underneath, "Please."

With a breath of good spirits I obeyed the instructions.

It wasn't much of a surprise when the chauffeur—not the same man as before—refused to tell me where we were going. It was, however, clear shortly that the signposts distantly promised Exeter. The chauffeur aimed at the heart of that city and pulled up outside the main doors of its grandest hotel. As before, the car's rear door was ceremoniously opened for me to step out, and he pointed silently towards the interior and left me to uniformed porters inquiring sniffily about my luggage.

My luggage this time again consisted of what I wore—white sweatshirt, new blue jeans, and well-worn running shoes. With undoubtedly more self-confidence than at Brighton I walked into the lobby and asked at the reception desk for George Juliard.

The receptionist pressed buttons on a computer.

"Sorry. No one called Juliard staying at the hotel." She gave me a professional smile.

The hotel's lobby bulged at one side into a glass-roofed conservatory section with armchairs and green plants, and I sat there considering what I should do next. Had my father intended me to get to know Exeter before I went to its university? Or what?

After about half an hour a man dressed much as I was, though a good ten years older, appeared in the lobby. He looked around and drifted unhurriedly in my direction.

"Juliard?" he said. "Benedict?"

"Yes." I stood up, taller than he by an inch or two. He had yellow-blond hair, white eyelashes, and outdoor skin. A man of strong muscles, self-confident, at home in his world.

"I'm Jim," he said. "I've come to collect you."

"Who are you?" I asked. "Where are we going?"

He smiled and said merely, "Come on."

He led the way out of the hotel, fetching up beside a dusty, dented red car that contained torn magazines, screwed-up sandwich papers, coffee-stained polystyrene cups.

"Disregard the mess," Jim said cheerfully, sweeping crumpled newspapers off the front passenger seat onto the floor. "Happy birthday, by the way."

"Uh . . . thanks."

He drove eight miles westward, as far as I could judge. Out of the city, past a signpost to Exeter University's Streatham campus—home, among much else, of the department of mathematics—deep into rural Devon, with thatched roofs frowning over tiny-windowed cottages. Jim jerked to a halt in front of a larger example of the basic pattern and pointed to a heavy wooden front door.

"Go in there," he instructed. "Down the passage, last room on the left." He grinned. "And good luck."

"Who lives here?" I asked.

"You'll find out."

He left me with a simple choice: to do as I'd been told or find a way of returning to Exeter. Alice down the rabbit hole, I thought.

I opened the heavy door and went along the passage.

In the last room on the left, a man sat behind a desk, and at first I thought with an unwelcome skipped heartbeat that he was Vivian Durridge, intent on sacking me all over again.

He looked up from his paperwork as I went in, and I saw that though he wasn't Durridge himself, he was of the same generation and same severe cast of mind. He gave me no greeting but looked me slowly up and down.

"Your father has gone to a great deal of trouble for you," he said. "I hope you're worth it."

No reply seemed suitable, so I didn't make one.

"Do you know who I am?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"Stallworthy."

He waited for the name to trickle through my brain, which it did pretty fast. It was the implication of his name that slowed my reply. Too much hope was bad for the pulse.

"Er, you mean Spencer Stallworthy, the racehorse trainer?"

"I do." He paused. "Your father telephoned me. He wants to buy

a horse and put it in training here so that you can bicycle over from the university to ride it out at exercise. He asked me to enter it in amateur events so that you can ride it in races."

He studied my face. I must have looked pretty ecstatic because a slow wintry smile lightened his heavy expression.

"I just hope," he said, "that you can ride well enough not to disgrace my stable."

I just hoped he hadn't been talking to Vivian Durridge.

"Your father asked me to find a suitable horse. I told him I have two at present which might fit the bill. Your father and I agreed that you should come here today and ride both. You are to choose which you prefer. He wanted it to be a surprise, and I see it is."

I breathlessly nodded.

"Right. Then go out of the back door. My assistant, Jim, he'll drive you along to the stables. Off you go, then."

"Er," I said, "thank you very much."

He nodded and bent his head to his paperwork, and Jim, grinning widely, drove half a mile to the stable yard, which was old, needed paint, and had sent out winners by the dozen over the years to small races on west-country courses.

Jim stood in the yard and laconically pointed. "Tack room there. Horse in number twenty-seven. Okay?"

I took a look at the occupant of box 27 and found a heavily muscled chestnut gelding standing there, anxious, it seemed, to gallop. He had nice short legs, with hocks not too angular, and a broad chest capable of pushing his way over or through any obstacle that came his way. More the type of a tough, hardy steeplechaser than an ex–flat racer graduating to jumps. I guessed at stamina that might take a tiring amateur steadfastly towards the finish line. If there was anything against him at first sight, it was perhaps that he was a bit short in the neck.

Jim whistled up a groom to saddle and bridle the chestnut. Neither Jim nor the groom saw anything but sense when I asked if I could see the chestnut led around the yard at a walk. Somewhere along the way in my racing education I'd been told by an avuncular

old pro jockey that a horse that walked well galloped well. A long, slow stride boded well for long-distance steeplechases. A tittupping scratchy little walker meant a nervous, scratchy little galloper.

The stride of the chestnut's walk was long enough and slow enough to suggest a temperament that would plod forever. When he and his groom had completed two circuits of the yard, I stopped him and felt his legs (no bumps from past tendon trouble) and looked in his mouth and estimated him to be about seven years old, a good solid age for a steeplechaser.

"Where do I ride him?" I asked Jim, and he pointed to a gate into a vast field that proved to be the chief training ground.

"You can trot or canter down to the far end," Jim said, "and come back at a half-speed gallop. He knows the way."

I swung onto the chestnut's back and put the toes of my unsuitable running shoes into the stirrups, lengthening the leathers while getting to know the "feel" of the big creature who would give me at least an illusion of being where I belonged. The Stallworthy chestnut was in a good mood, standing patiently through the stirrup-leather lengthening while Jim sorted out a helmet in the tack room. I hadn't sat on a horse for three and a half weeks. If he'd been mean-spirited that morning, he could have run away with me and made a fool of my deficient strength, but he went out onto the exercise ground as quietly as an old hack.

I didn't enjoy his trot, which was lumpy and threw me about, but his canter was like an armchair. We went in harmony down to the far end of the field where the land dropped away a bit, so that the first part of the gallop home was uphill, good for strengthening legs. At a half-speed gallop, riding the chestnut was a bit like sitting astride a launched rocket: powerful, purposeful, difficult to deflect. I reined to a slightly breathless walk and went over to where Jim waited beside the gate.

"Right," he said noncommittally, "now try the other one."

The other horse, a bay gelding with a black mane, was of a leaner type and struck me as more of a speed merchant than the one I'd just ridden. He carried his head higher and was frisky and eager to

set off and get into his stride. I stood with my toes in the irons all the way down the field, letting the trot and canter flow beneath me. This was not a horse schooled to give his rider a peaceful look at the countryside; this was a fellow bred to race, for whom nothing else was of interest. At the end of the field, instead of turning quietly, he did one of those swerving pirouettes with a dropped shoulder, a maneuver guaranteed to fling an unwary jockey off sideways. I'd seen many horses do that. I'd been flung off myself. But I was ready for Stallworthy's bay to try it, more from eagerness to gallop than from spite.

His half-speed gallop home was a battle against my arms all the way. He wanted to go much faster. Thoughtfully I slid off his back and led him to Jim at the gate.

"Right," Jim said. "Which do you want?"

"Er . . ." I patted the bay's neck. "How about," I suggested, "a look at the form books over a sandwich in a pub?"

Jim briefly laughed. "I was told I was to fetch a schoolkid. You're some schoolkid."

With good-natured irony he collected the records from Stallworthy's house and drove us to a local pub, where he was greeted as a friendly regular. We sat, and he put the form books on the table beside the beer (him) and the Diet Coke (me).

In steeplechase breeding it's the dams that matter. A dam who breeds one winner will most likely breed others. The chestnut's dam had never herself won, though two of her progeny had. The chestnut so far hadn't finished nearer than second.

The bay's dam had never even raced, but all of her progeny, except the first foal, had won. The bay had won twice.

Both horses were eight. "Tell me about them," I said to Jim. "Why are they for sale?"

"Their owners are short of money."

"My father would need a vet's certificate."

"I'll see to it. Which horse do you want?"

"I'll talk to my father and let you know."

Jim drove me back to Exeter by three o'clock, and with a grin

and a warm slap on the back he handed me over to the black car with the silent chauffeur.

"See you, then," Jim said.

"I can hardly wait." The future had spectacularly clarified.

The chauffeur took me not to the party headquarters, but to a playing field on the edge of Hoopwestern, where an afternoon amalgam of fete and political rally was drawing to a close. Balloons, bouncy castle, bright plastic chutes, and merry-go-rounds had drawn children and voting parents. Painted banners promised GRAND OPENING BY MRS. ORINDA NAGLE AT 3:00 AND GEORGE JULIARD, 3:15. Both were still present at 5:30, shaking hands all around.

Dearest Polly saw the car and hurried over to greet me. "Happy birthday, Benedict. Did you choose a horse?"

"So he told you?" I looked across the field to where he stood on the soapbox surrounded by autograph books.

"He's been high as a kite all day." Polly's smile stretched inches. "He told me he's gotten to know you for the first time ever and that he wanted to give you something to thank you for all you've done."

"Polly!"

"He told me he hadn't realized how much he'd asked you to give up, with going to university instead of racing, and that you hadn't rebelled. He wanted to give you the best he could."

I swallowed. He saw me across the field and waved. Polly and I walked over and stopped outside a hedge of autograph seekers.

"Well?" he said over their heads. "Did you like one?"

I couldn't think of adequate words. He looked, however, at my face and smiled at what he saw there. He stepped off the soapbox and made his way through the autograph books, signing left and right, until he was within touching distance, and there he stopped.

We looked at each other in great accord.

"Well, go on," Polly said to me impatiently. "Hug him."

But I didn't touch him, and I realized we had no tradition between us of how to express greeting or emotion and that until that moment there had never been much intense mutual emotion to express. Far from hugging, we had never shaken hands.

"Thanks," I said to him.

He nodded. It was enough.

"I want to tell you about it," I said.

"At dinner, then."

Orinda was smiling warmly at me, fully recovered, makeup hiding any residual marks, all traces of the frightened woman in blood-spattered clothes overlaid by her assumed role as constituency wife, the opener of fetes and natural hogger of cameras.

"Benedict daaahling!" She, at least, had no inhibitions and embraced me soundly for public consumption. She smelled sweetly of scent. She wore a copper-colored dress with green embroidery to match her eyes, and Polly beside me stiffened.

Dearest Polly. I was far too young externally to show I understood her, let alone insult her by offering comforts. Polly wore remnants of the awful lipstick, a chunky necklace of amber beads, and heavily strapped sandals below a muddy green dress. I liked both women, but on the evidence of their clothes, they would never equally like each other.

Instinctively, I looked over Orinda's shoulder, expecting the Anonymous Lover to be back at his post, but Wyvern had once and for all abandoned Hoopwestern. In his place behind Orinda loomed Leonard Kitchens with a soppy grin below his mustache. Usher Rudd was wandering about, trying to catch people photographically at a disadvantage, but when he caught my eye, he veered away.

Four days to polling day, I thought. Eternity.

Over dinner in the hotel dining room, I told my father about the two Stallworthy horses. A phlegmatic chestnut stayer and a sprinting excitable bay with a black mane.

"Well," he said, frowning, "you love speed. You'll take the bay. What makes you hesitate?"

"The horse I want has a name that might disturb you. I can't change his name. One isn't allowed to after a Thoroughbred has raced. I won't have that horse unless it's okay with you."

He stared. "What name could possibly disturb me so much?"

After a pause I said flatly, "Sarah's Future."

"Ben!"

"His dam was Sarah Jones, his sire Bright Future. It's good breeding for a jumper."

"The bay?"

"No," I said, "the chestnut. He's the one I want. He felt right. He'd look after me."

My father absentmindedly crumbled a bread roll to pieces.

"You," he said eventually, "you are literally Sarah's future. She would be pleased. I'll phone Stallworthy in the morning."

DURING the run-up to polling day, the Juliard camp spent the last three days in a nonstop whirlwind.

I drove the Range Rover from breakfast to bedtime all around the villages. I screwed together and unclipped the soapbox until I could do it in my sleep. I loaded and unloaded boxes of leaflets. I cooed at babies and played ball games with kids and shook uncountable hands and smiled and smiled and smiled.

I thought of Sarah's Future and was content.

On the last evening, Wednesday, my father invited all his helpers to The Sleeping Dragon for a thank-you supper. In a room off the town hall Paul Bethune was doing the same. The Bethune cavalcade had several times crossed our path, their megaphone louder, their traveling circus larger. Bethune's message followed him everywhere: "Elect Bethune, a local man, who knows the score."

A recent opinion poll in the constituency had put Bethune a few points ahead. Fringe candidates Titmuss and Whistle were nowhere.

My father thanked his faithful workers. "Whatever happens tomorrow," he said, "I want you to know how much I appreciate the time you've given, your tireless energy, your friendly good nature. We've all done our best to get the party's message across. Now it's up to the voters to decide."

He thanked Orinda for rallying to his side. ". . . all the difference in the world to have her support . . . immensely generous . . . reassuring to the faithful." Orinda, splendid in gold chains and emerald green, looked modest and loved it.

Polly, beside me, made a noise near to a retch.

I stifled a quivering giggle.

The speeches done, my father came over to Polly and me, his eyes gleaming with excitement, his whole body alive with purpose. "I'm going to win," he said, broadly smiling. "I can feel it."

His euphoria lasted through breakfast the next morning. The glooms crowded in with his second cup of coffee, and he began worrying that he hadn't worked hard enough, that there was more he could have done.

"You'll win," I said. "Stop worrying." As if he could.

The anxiety went on all day. After weeks of fine weather it rained hard that afternoon. Both sides thought it might be a disaster. Both sides thought it might be to their advantage. The rain stopped when the lightbulb workers poured out of the day shift and detailed to the polling booths on their way home.

The polls closed at ten o'clock, and the counting began.

My father stood in our bedroom window staring out across the cobbled square. "I was headhunted, you know," he said. "The party leaders came to me and said they wanted to harness my economic skills for the good of the country. What if I've let them down?"

"You won't have," I assured him. "Father . . ."

"Dad."

"Okay, Dad. Good men do lose."

"Thanks a lot."

We went in time along the square to the town hall, where, far from offering peace, the atmosphere was electric with hope. Paul Bethune, surrounded by hugely rosetted supporters, was trying hard to smile. Isobel Bethune, in dark brown, tried to merge into the woodwork. Mervyn talked to Bethune's agent absentmindedly, and Usher Rudd took merciless photographs.

There was a smattering of applause at my father's entrance, and both Polly (in pinkish gray) and Orinda (in dramatic, glittering white) sailed across the floor to greet him.

"George, daaahling," Orinda crowed, offering her smooth cheek for a kiss. George daaahling looked embarrassed.

"It's going quite well, George," Polly said. "First reports say the town votes are fairly even."

The counting was going on under rigorous supervision. My father and Paul Bethune looked as calm as neither was feeling.

The hall gradually filled. After midnight, getting on for one o'clock, the four candidates and their close supporters appeared on the platform. Paul Bethune looked around irritably for his wife, but she'd hidden herself in the crowd. Orinda stood close beside my father as of right, and Polly, beside me on the floor, fumed that it should be me up there, not that . . . that . . .

Words failed her.

Finally, the returning officer, whose function was to announce the result, fussed his way onto the center stage, tapped the microphone to make sure it was working, grinned at the television cameras, and rather unnecessarily asked for silence. He strung out his moment of importance by looking around to make sure everyone was there on the platform who should be, and finally, slowly, read the result.

Alphabetically.

Bethune . . . thousands.

Juliard . . . thousands.

Titmuss . . . hundreds.

Whistle . . . sixty-nine.

It took a moment to sink in. Staring down a preliminary cheer from the floor, the returning officer completed his task.

George Juliard is therefore elected. . . .

The rest was drowned in cheers.

Polly worked it out. "He won by just under two thousand. Well done." She kissed me.

Up on the stage Orinda was loudly kissing the new M.P. It was too much for Dearest Polly, who left my side to go to his.

I found poor, sad Isobel Bethune at my elbow instead.

"Look at that harridan with your father, pretending it was *she* who won the votes."

"She did help, to be fair."

"It was your father who won the election. And my Paul positively

lost. Your father never mentioned that bimbo of Paul's, though he could have done, but the public never forget those things."

"Mrs. Bethune—"

"This is the third time Paul's contested the seat," she said hopelessly. "We knew he would lose to Dennis Nagle the last two times, but this time the party said he was bound to win. They'll never let Paul stand again, and it's that horrid Usher Rudd's fault. I could *kill* him." She smothered her face in a handkerchief and, stroking my arm, mumbled, "I'll never forget your kindness."

I was certain even then that I would never forget the mean-spirited red-haired terror whose delight in life was to find out people's hidden pleasures in order to destroy them. Bobby Usher Rudd.

SO MY father went to Westminster and I to Exeter, and the intense month we had spent in getting to know each other receded into a calmer, picture-filled memory. I might not see him for weeks at a time, but we talked often on the telephone. Parliament was still in its summer recess. He would go back as a new boy, as I would, when my first term began.

Meantime I rode Sarah's Future every morning under Stallworthy's critical eye and can't have done badly, because when I asked if he would enter the chestnut in a race for me—any race would do—he chose a novice steeplechase at Wincanton and told me he hoped I'd be worth it, as it was costing my father extras in horse transport and shoeing with racing plates, not to mention the entry fee.

Laden thus half with glee and half with guilt, I went with Jim in his car to Wincanton, where he declared and saddled Sarah's Future and then watched him win with as much disbelief as I felt when I sailed past the post first.

"He *flew!*" I said, thrilled and astonished, as I unbuckled the saddle in the winner's enclosure. "He was brilliant."

"So I saw."

Jim's lack of much enthusiasm, I discovered, was rooted in his not having had the faith for a bet. Neither was Stallworthy overjoyed. All he said the next morning was, "You wasted the horse's best win. You haven't any sense. If I'd thought you would go to the front when the favorite fell, I'd have told you to keep the chestnut on a tight rein so we could have put the stable money on him next time out. What your father will say I can't imagine."

What my father said was, "Very well done."

"But nobody backed it."

"Don't listen to Stallworthy. That horse is for you to do your best on. And don't think I didn't back it. I have an arrangement with a bookmaker that whenever you ride in a race, I am betting on you at starting price. *Always* try to win. Understand?"

I said "Yes" weakly.

"And I don't care if you lose because some other horse is faster. Just keep to the rules and don't break your neck."

"Okay."

"Is there anything else you want?"

"Well, will you telephone Stallworthy? Will you ask him to run your horse at Newton Abbot a week tomorrow? He's entered him, but now he won't want to run him. He'll say the horse will have to carry a 5-lb. penalty because I won on him yesterday."

"And will he?"

"Yes, but there aren't many more races before term starts. Stallworthy wants to win, but I just want to *race.*"

He paused. "I'll fix it. Anything else?"

"Only . . . thanks."

His laugh came down the wire. "Give my regards to Sarah's Future."

Feeling a bit foolish, I passed on the message to the chestnut, though in fact I had fallen into a habit of talking to him if we were alone. I had ridden a good many horses, but he was the first I had

known consistently from day to day. He fitted my body size and my level of skill. He undoubtedly recognized me and seemed almost to breathe a sigh of relief when I appeared every morning for exercise. We had won the race at Wincanton because we knew and trusted each other, and when I'd asked him for maximum speed at the end, he'd understood what was needed, and had seemed positively to exult in having at last finished first. With Sarah's Future I began to develop from an uncoordinated windmill with a head full of unrealistic dreams into a reasonably competent amateur rider.

Grumbling at great length about owners who knew nothing about racing and should leave decisions to their trainer, Stallworthy sent the chestnut to carry his 5-lb. penalty at Newton Abbot.

I'd never ridden on the course and at first sight of it felt foolish not to have listened to Stallworthy's judgment. The steeplechase track was an almost one-and-a-half-mile flat circuit with sharpish turns, and the short grass gave little purchase on rock-hard ground, baked by the sun of August. Jim, saddling Sarah's Future, told me the chestnut knew the course better than I did (I'd walked around it a couple of hours earlier to see the jumps) and to remember not to expect too much, because of the weight disadvantage and because the other jockeys were all professionals.

As usual, it was the speed that seduced me and fulfilled, and the fact that we finished third was enough to make my day worthwhile, though Stallworthy announced to me, "I told you so. Perhaps you'll listen next time."

"Never mind," Jim consoled. "If you'd won today, you'd have to have carried a 10-lb. penalty at Exeter races next Saturday, always supposing you can persuade the old man to let him run there after this. He'll say it's too soon, which it probably *is*."

The old man (Stallworthy) conducted a running battle over the telephone with my father. My father won. So, blisteringly, by six lengths, did Sarah's Future. He carried a 5-lb. penalty, not 10, and made light of it. The starting price, my father assured me later, would pay the training fees until Christmas.

Two days later, in cooler blood, I went to learn mathematics.

MY FATHER LEARNED parliamentary tactics, but that wasn't what the party had sent him to Hoopwestern for. When the newly elected member for Hoopwestern was shortly appointed as undersecretary of state in the Department of Trade and Industry, it was apparently a signal to the whole fabric of government that a bright, fast-moving comet had risen over the horizon.

I went to listen to his maiden speech, sitting inconspicuously in the gallery. I met him for dinner after his speech, when he was again in high post-performance spirits.

"I suppose you haven't been back to Hoopwestern?" he said.

"Well, no."

"I have, of course. Leonard Kitchens is in trouble."

"Who? Oh, yes. The unbalanced mustache. What sort of trouble?"

"The police have a rifle which may be the one fired at us."

"By the police," I asked, "do you mean Joe the policeman whose mother drives a school bus?"

"Joe whose mother drives a school bus is actually Detective Sergeant Joe Duke, and yes, he's now received from The Sleeping Dragon a very badly rusted .22 rifle. It seems that after the trees shed their leaves, the guttering round the roof of the hotel got choked with them, so they sent a man up a ladder and found it wasn't just leaves clogging the guttering, it was the .22 rifle."

"But what's that got to do with Leonard Kitchens?"

My father ate peppered steak, rare, with spinach.

"Leonard Kitchens is the nurseryman who festoons The Sleeping Dragon with all those baskets of geraniums. Apparently, in a broom cupboard he keeps a sort of cart with things for looking after the baskets. Shears, watering can, fertilizer. They think he could have hidden the gun in the cart. If you stand on a chair by the window, you can reach up far enough outside to put a rifle up in the gutter. And someone did put a gun up there."

I frowned over my food.

"You know what people are like," my father said. "Someone says, 'I *suppose* Leonard Kitchens could have put the rifle in the gutter,' and the next person drops 'I suppose' and repeats the rest as a fact."

"What does Leonard Kitchens himself say?"

"He says it wasn't his gun and he didn't put it in the gutter, and he says no one can prove he did. It's true. No one has come forward to connect him to rifles in any way."

"What does Mrs. Kitchens say?"

"Leonard's wife is doing him no good at all. She goes around saying her husband was so besotted with Orinda Nagle that he would do anything, including shooting me in the back, to get me out of Orinda's way. Joe Duke asked if she had ever seen a rifle in her husband's possession, and she said he had a garden shed full of junk and it was possible he had anything in there."

"Did Joe search the shed? I mean, did he have a look around to see if Leonard had any bullets?"

"Joe couldn't get a warrant to search, as there were no real grounds for suspicion. There's no chance of telling that it was indeed that rifle that was used, because there is no bullet to match it to, as the one from the whatnot got lost in the fire."

My father continued with his steak. I thought for a moment and asked, "And the fire? Was that Leonard Kitchens, too?"

"He was there," my father reminded me, and I remembered Mrs. Kitchens saying her Leonard liked a good fire.

"Did the firemen ever find out how that fire started?"

My father shook his head. "Leonard Kitchens fiercely denies he had anything to do with it."

"What do you think yourself?"

My father drank some wine. He was trying to indoctrinate me into liking burgundy, but to his disgust, I still liked Diet Coke better. He said, "I think Leonard Kitchens is fanatical enough to do almost anything. It's easy to think of him as a bit of a silly ass, with that out-of-proportion mustache, but it's people with obsessions who do real harm in the world, and if he still has a grudge against me, I want him where I can see him."

I did my best with the wine, but I didn't really like it.

"There's no point in his arranging accidents for you anymore, now that you're elected."

My father sighed. "With people like Kitchens you can't be sure that good sense will be in control."

I stayed with him that night in his Canary Wharf apartment by the Thames. His big windows looked down the wide river. His home gave him a two-mile walk along the Embankment to his new office in Whitehall, a leg-stretching that was clearly keeping him fit. He blazed with vigor and excitement. I felt both energized and overwhelmed by his vitality.

In a way I deeply loved him.

In a way I felt incapable of ever equaling his mental force or his determination. It took me years to realize that I didn't have to.

ON THE morning after his maiden speech I caught the early train from Paddington to Exeter, clicketing along the rails from reflected fame to anonymity.

In Exeter, one of eight thousand residential students, I coasted through university life without attracting much attention and absorbed reams of calculus, linear algebra, actuarial science, and distribution theory towards a bachelor of science degree in mathematics with accounting. As often as possible I cycled to Stallworthy's stable to ride Sarah's Future and on several Saturdays set off from starting gates. After the first flourish, finding winning races for a steady but unspectacular jumper proved difficult, but also-ran was fine by me: fourth, fifth, sixth, one easy fall and no tailed-offs.

On one very cold December Saturday, towards the end of my first term, I was in the stands at Taunton watching one of Stallworthy's string scud first towards the last flight of hurdles when it crashed and fell in a cascading cartwheel of legs and snapped its neck. They put screens around the disaster and winched the body away, and within ten minutes I came across Stallworthy trying to comfort the female owner. Crying ladies were not Stallworthy's specialty. He passed the weeping woman into my arms and told me to take her for a drink.

Mrs. Courtney Young, the bereaved owner, wiped away her tears and tried to apologize while a large bracer of gin took effect.

"It's all right," I said. "If my horse died, I'd be devastated."

"You don't understand." Fresh tears rolled. "I let the horse's insurance lapse because I couldn't afford the premium. I owe Mr. Stallworthy a lot of training fees, and I was sure my horse would win today, so I could pay off my debts, and I backed it with a bookie, and I haven't any money to pay him. I was going to have to sell my horse anyway, if he didn't win, but now I can't do even that."

Poor Mrs. Courtney Young.

"She's mad," Jim told me later. "She bets too much."

"What will she do?"

"Do?" he exclaimed. "She'll sell a few more heirlooms. She'll buy another horse. One day she'll lose the lot."

I grieved very briefly for Courtney Young, but that evening I telephoned my father and suggested he insure Sarah's Future. "For your sake," I said.

"Who arranges horse insurance?"

"Weatherbys."

"Send me the paperwork."

Weatherbys, the firm that arranged insurance, was the administrator for the whole of racing. It was Weatherbys who registered horses' names and ownership details, including colors, Weatherbys to whom trainers sent entries for races, Weatherbys who confirmed a horse was running and sent details of racing programs to the press, Weatherbys who printed race cards. Weatherbys kept the Thoroughbred Stud Book and acted as a bank for the transfer of fees to jockeys, prize money to owners. There wasn't much in racing, in fact, that Weatherbys didn't do.

It was because of tearful, silly Mrs. Courtney Young that I began to think that one distant day I might apply to Weatherbys for a job.

IN THE spring of my third year of study my father came to Exeter to see me (he had been a couple of times before) and to my surprise brought with him Dearest Polly.

I had spent a week of each Christmas holiday skiing, and I'd been riding and racing in every spare minute, but I also played fair and

passed all my exams with reasonable grades, so when I saw him arrive, a quick canter around the guilt reflexes raised no wincing specters. I shook his hand—we had at least advanced that far—with uncomplicated pleasure.

"I don't know if you realize," my father said, "that we are fast approaching a general election."

My immediate reaction was Oh, no. I managed not to say it aloud, but it must have been plain on my face.

Polly laughed, and my father said, "This time I'm not asking you to canvass door to door."

"But you need a bodyguard."

"I've engaged a professional."

I felt instantly jealous: ridiculous. It took me a good ten seconds to say sincerely, "I hope he'll mind your back."

"He's a she. All sorts of belts in martial arts."

"Oh." I glanced at Polly, who looked merely benign.

"Polly and I," my father said, "propose to marry. We came to hear if you had any objections."

"Polly!"

"Dear Benedict," she said. "Your father is so abrupt. I would have asked you more gently."

"I've no objections," I said. "Very much the opposite." I kissed her cheek.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed. "You've grown."

"I'm over an inch taller and fifteen pounds heavier than I was at Hoopwestern." I sighed. Too big, I might have added, for a professional jockey but an excellent size for an amateur.

Polly herself hadn't changed, except that the crimson lipstick had been jettisoned for an equally inappropriate scarlet. Her clothes still looked unfashionable even by charity-shop standards, and no one had taken recent scissors to her hair. With her long face and stringy body she looked a total physical mismatch for my increasingly powerful father, but positive goodness shone out of her as always. There had never been anything gauche or self-conscious in her manner, only the strength to be her own intelligent, uncompromising self.

More than a marriage of true minds, I thought. A marriage of true morality. I said sincerely to my father, "Congratulations," and he looked pleased.

"What are you doing next Saturday?" he asked.

"Racing at Chepstow."

He was shaking his head. "I want you to stand beside me."

"You mean"—I hesitated—"you are marrying next Saturday?"

"That's right," he agreed. "Now that we've decided, there's no point in delaying. I'm going to live with Polly in her house in the woods, and I'll also find a larger apartment in London."

Polly was two years older than my father. She had never been married. A mischievous glint in her eye both forbade and answered the more intimate question.

She didn't intend, she said, to make a wasteland of Orinda Nagle's life. Orinda and Mervyn Teck had been running the constituency day to day. Polly didn't hunger to open fetes or flirt with cameras. She would organize, as always, from behind the scenes. And she would be listened to, I thought, where influence mattered.

Six days later she and my father married in the ultimate of quiet weddings. The bride wore brown with a gold-and-amber necklet given by my father, and looked distinguished. A photographer recorded the event. A discreet paragraph appeared in *The Times.* The Hoopwestern *Gazette* caught up with the story later. Mr. and Mrs. George Juliard, after a week in Paris, returned to Hoopwestern to keep the lightbulb workers faithful.

I still disliked politics. There were many politically active students at Exeter, but I kept my head down with them and led a double life only on various racetracks. I won no races that spring, but the sensation of speed was all that mattered. In an oddity of brain activity, the more often I raced, the more clearly I understood second-order differential equations.

The general election swelled and broke under me like a Pacific surf, and my father and his party were returned to power. No one shot at him, no one plugged his sump drain with wax, no one set fire to Polly's house. Suspicion of shooting and arson still lay heavily

on Leonard Kitchens, but this time his formidable and unforgiving wife insisted on his taking her on a Mediterranean cruise. They were in Athens on polling day.

Poor Isobel Bethune had been right. Paul Bethune's party dumped him as a candidate in favor of a woman magistrate. Though it was no longer hotly scandalous news, Bethune's roving eye had settled again outside his home, and Isobel at last had shed her marriage and gone to live with her sister in Wales.

Polly kept me informed, her humor dry. My father couldn't have married anyone better.

I told him to beware of bikini-clad bimbos falling artistically into his lap with Usher Rudd in attendance for accusations of sleaze. Hadn't I heard, he asked, that Usher Rudd had been sacked by the *Gazette* for manufacturing scandal where it didn't exist? Usher Rudd, my father cheerfully said, was now telephoto-lens-stalking a promiscuous member of the opposition.

When the party in power reassembled after the country had voted, there was a major reshuffle of jobs. My father's career skipped upward like helium, and he became a minister of state in the Ministry of Transport, one step down from the Cabinet.

I had the best photograph of his wedding to Polly framed and stood it beside the one of him and my mother. I took the pacts we'd signed out of my mother's frame and read them thoughtfully and put them back. They seemed to belong to a different life. I had grown up at Exeter, and I'd had "the first" that I would never forget; but the basic promises of those pacts had so far been kept, and although now it might seem a melodramatic statement, I knew that if it ever became necessary, I would indeed defend my father against any form of attack.

I TOOK my final exams, and sensing that I'd probably done reasonably well, I wrote to Weatherbys and asked for a job.

They replied, what job?

Any, I wrote. I could add, subtract, and work computers, and I had ridden in races.

Ah, *that* Juliard. Come for an interview, they said.

Weatherbys, a family business started in 1770 and currently servicing racing in increasingly inventive and efficient ways, stood quietly in red brick, surrounded by peaceful countryside near the small, ancient town of Wellingborough, sixty miles northwest of London.

Inside, the atmosphere of the furiously busy secretariat was notably calm. Knowing the vast scope and daily pressure of the work done there, I suppose I'd expected something like the clattering frenzy of a newspaper office, but what I walked into was near to silence, with rows of heads bent over computers and people walking among them, not scurrying, carrying papers and boxes of disks.

I was handed from department to department and in an undemanding interview was asked for my references. I went away in disappointment. They had been polite but had asked none of the piercing questions I would have expected if they'd had a job to offer.

Back at Exeter, I dispiritedly began sending job applications to a list of industries. Weatherbys had seemed my natural home: Too bad they didn't see me as their child. They did, however, follow up on the references I'd given them—my tutor at the university and Stallworthy himself.

The gruff old trainer told me he'd said my character and behavior were satisfactory. Thanks a lot, I thought. Jim laughed. "He doesn't want you to leave and take Sarah's Future. It's a wonder he didn't call you a loudmouthed troublemaker!"

There was a letter from my tutor and a photocopy of his reference. His testimonial in full read:

> Benedict Juliard is likely to have gained a creditable degree in mathematics with accounting, though not a brilliant one. He took very little part in student activities during his three years at university, as it seems he was exclusively interested in horses. There are no adverse reports of his character and behavior.

Damn, I thought. Oh, well.

Much to my astonishment I also received a letter from Sir Vivian Durridge.

My dear Benedict,

I am delighted to have seen over the past three years that you have had the opportunity to ride successfully as an amateur on your father's horse, Sarah's Future. I am sure that he has told you he enlisted my help in making you face the fact that you were not cut out for rising to the top in the steeplechase jockeys' list. Looking back, I see that I was unnecessarily brutal in accusing you of drug taking, as I knew perfectly well at the time that with your sort of character you did not, but on that particular morning it seemed to me—and I regret it—that it was the only thing that would disturb you so badly that you would do as your father wanted, which was to go to university.

I have now heard from a friend of mine at Weatherbys that you have applied to them for a job. I enclose a photocopy of a letter I have written to them, and I hope that in some way this may straighten things between us.

Yours sincerely,
Vivian Durridge

His enclosure read:

To whom it may concern:

Benedict Juliard rode my horses as a sixteen- and seventeen-year-old amateur jockey. I found him completely trustworthy in every respect and would give him my unqualified endorsement in any position he applied for.

I sat down, the pages shaking in my hands. Vivian Durridge was the last person I would ever have applied to for a thumbs-up.

I had vaguely been looking for a safe place to keep my birth certificate so as not to lose it while moving from lodgings to lodgings. I knew I wouldn't lose the marriage photographs, so I decided to put my birth certificate behind my father and Polly, and as I'd been doing that when Vivian Durridge's remarkable letter arrived, I folded his pages into the frame, too.

Three days later the mail brought an envelope bearing the Weath-

erbys logo—a stallion standing under an oak tree, from a painting by George Stubbs. I was cravenly afraid of opening it. It would begin "We regret . . ."

Well, it had to be faced.

I opened the envelope, and the letter began "We are pleased . . ."

Pleased.

That evening my father telephoned. "Is it true you've got yourself a job at Weatherbys?"

"Yes. How do you know?"

He had been talking to one of the Weatherby cousins at a dinner in the City, he said. The web of insider chat in the City far outdid the Internet.

I asked if I could move Sarah's Future from Devon.

"Find a trainer."

"Thanks."

Spencer Stallworthy grumbled. Jim shrugged. Life always moved on. I parted from them with gratitude and vanned my chestnut pal to a new home.

WEATHERBYS took me into their racing operations department, which handled entries, runners, weights, riders—all the details of every race run in Britain, amounting to about a thousand transactions most days and up to three thousand at busy times.

All this computer speed took place in the calm quietness so impressive on my first visit. I'd thought that at just twenty-one I might be at a disadvantage from youth, but I found that the whole staff were young and enjoyed what they were doing. Within a month I couldn't imagine working anywhere else.

Every so often my own name cropped up whenever I was actually racing. It became a sort of running joke. "Hey, Juliard, if you race that nag again at Fontwell, he'll suffer a 7-lb. penalty," or "Hey, Juliard, you carried overweight at Ludlow. Cut down on the plum pudding!"

Sarah's Future, as far as I could tell, enjoyed the exchange of the soft air of Devon for the brisker winds of farther north. He still ac-

knowledged my morning arrivals with much head nodding and blow breathing down his wide black nostrils, and he seemed to think it normal that I should embrace his neck and tell him he was a great fella, and mean it. After several years together that chestnut and I were probably as near to brothers as interspecies relationships could get.

One Saturday, about a year after I'd started at Weatherbys, the horse and I lined up at Towcester for an uneventful three-mile steeplechase, my father's inconspicuous colors of gold and gray made even less discernible by a persistent drizzle.

No one in the stands seemed afterwards to be clear about what happened. From my point of view we were rising cleanly in a take-off to a big open-ditch fence, coming up the hill towards the straight. Another horse tripped and crashed into us, knocking Sarah's Future completely off-balance. He landed in a heap, throwing me off forward. I connected with the ground in one of those crunching collisions that tells you at once that you've broken a bone, without being sure *which* bone. I rolled, tucking my head in to save it from the hooves of the runners behind me. The remainder of the horses clattered over my head as I lay winded and anxious on the slippery grass with blades of it in my mouth and up my nose, and dislodging my goggles after an uncontrollable slide.

The clamor of the contest faded away towards the next fence. The horse that had crashed into Sarah's Future scrambled to its feet and trotted off as if dazed, and his unseated rider bent over me with "Are you all right, mate?"

I gripped his hand to haul myself to my feet and found that the bone I'd broken was somewhere in my left shoulder.

Sarah's Future, also on his feet, was trying to walk but succeeding only in hobbling around in a circle. A groundsman caught him by the bridle and held him. In hopeless love for the horse, I walked over to him and tried to will it not to be true, not to be possible that after so long this closest of companionships should have so suddenly come to the edge of a precipice.

I knew, as every rider of any experience knew, that there was

nothing to be done. Sarah's Future, like Sarah herself, was going to eternity in my hands.

I wept. I couldn't help it. It looked like the rain. The horse had broken his near foreleg. His jockey, his left collarbone.

The horse died. The jockey lived.

CHAPTER 7

MY FATHER had discontinued the insurance on Sarah's Future when I went to work for Weatherbys, partly, he'd said, because the horse was getting old and lessening in value and partly, punctiliously, so that if the horse was killed, Weatherbys would not have to pay up.

He would hear no apologies when I telephoned him. He briefly said, "Bad luck."

When I went back to work two days after Towcester, the man who had originally interviewed me drew up a chair at my desk.

"I didn't come to talk to you about your loss," the man said, "though you do have all my sympathy. And your arm is all right? I came to ask whether you would be interested in transferring from here into our insurance services department."

The insurance department, mainly one long room walled by books, files, and more files, was inhabited by two men also in their twenties. One was leaving the firm. Would I like his place?

Yes, I would.

Promotion struck the Juliards twice in one week. Another internal upheaval shuffled the cards in the government, and my father moved sideways and upwards to the Cabinet as minister for agriculture, fisheries and food.

I congratulated him.

"I would have preferred secretary of state for defense."

"Better luck next time," I said flippantly.

My father's resigned sigh came down the wire. "I suppose you've never heard of Hudson Hurst?"

"No."

"He beat me to Defense. He's currently the can-do-no-wrong flavor of the year with the prime minister."

"I'm sure the jellied eels and the brontosaurus burgers will be safe in your hands."

There were for once no agricultural crises looming, and both he and I spent the autumn of that year rooting ourselves comfortably in new realms. Not a great deal to my surprise I took to insurance with energy. It not only satisfied my inclination to numbers and probabilities but I got sent out fairly often on verification trips to see, for instance, if the polo ponies I was asked to set a premium for actually existed. As Evan, my co-worker and boss, preferred office work, I did more and more of the legwork, and it seemed a useful arrangement all around. I knew what good stables looked like and fast developed a nose for a rip-off.

A great advantage, it transpired, was my youth. I might not look seventeen anymore, but often at twenty-two I wasn't taken seriously enough. A mistake.

In the everyday work of the department, Evan, twenty-nine, and I handled policies on every sort of horse and need, from infertility in a stallion to barrenness in a mare. We also arranged cover for stable yards, personal accident, public liability, fire, theft, and measles. I did abominably miss my early mornings on Sarah's Future, but as dawn grew later and colder towards winter, I would have found, as I had the previous year, that only weekends gave me much scope.

As for riding in races, I was lucky. A Northamptonshire trainer phoned me one day to say an owner of his, a farmer, wanted a free jockey—an amateur—for a runner he thought had no chance. I happily took the ride, and the horse finished third. Delighted, the farmer put me up again, and although I never actually won for him, I got handed around to his friends like a box of chocolates and cantered down to a start somewhere most Saturdays.

It wasn't the same without Sarah's Future, but I wasn't ready to

try to replace him, even if I could have afforded it. One day, I thought. Perhaps.

I had rationalized my liking for speed. Taking intoxicating risks was normal in growing up. Warrior genes were inbred: It was necessary to fight the jumps and ski slopes, perhaps, in lieu of war.

Near Christmas my father said we'd been invited to a reception at number 10 Downing Street—himself, Polly, and I—for the customary jolly given by the prime minister to the members of his Cabinet and their families. My father hired a chauffeur, and the Juliards in good formation walked through the famous front door.

Staff greeted my father as one who belonged there. Polly had been through the portals before, but I felt awed as I trod through the entrance hall over the black-and-white-squared floor and up the historic staircase in a river of other guests. The brilliant yellow staircase wall, going up around a central well, was hung with portraits of all the past prime ministers; and I knew from the friendly way my father looked at them that he would like to join them one day.

The reception was chattering away in the large formal area upstairs known as the pillared drawing room. (It had pillars. Two.) We were greeted sweetly by Mrs. Prime Minister—her husband was *bound* to arrive shortly—and were wafted onwards to trays of filled glasses and tiny Christmassy mince pies surrounded with holly. I no longer asked annoyingly for Diet Coke. I drank the prime-ministerial champagne and liked it.

I knew almost no one, of course. Polly kept me in tow, though her husband had drifted away as if on wheels, greeting and laughing. The prime minister did arrive—he was *bound* to, after all—and my father saw to it that the great man shook Polly's hand with warm recognition and mine with at least a show of interest.

"You win races, don't you?" he asked, brow furrowed.

"Er, sometimes," I said weakly.

He nodded. "Your father's proud of you."

I did, I suppose, look astounded. The prime minister, a gently rounded man with a steel handshake, gave me an ironic smile as he passed to the next group.

Dearest Polly squeezed my arm. "George doesn't *say* he's proud of you. He just certainly sounds it."

"That makes us equal," I said.

My father's attention had purposefully wandered. "You see that man over there?"

There were about twenty men "over there." Polly said, "That one with flat white hair and circular eyes? The home secretary?"

"Yes, dearest. But I meant the one he's talking to. The one who's looking suitable for high office. He's Hudson Hurst."

Polly shook her head. "Surely not. Hudson Hurst has an oiled black ponytail and one of those mustache-and-beard combinations that frame a man's mouth and distract you from what he's saying."

"Not anymore." My father smiled but not with joy. "Someone must have persuaded Hurst that the topiary work was a political no-no. He's cut the hair and shaved. What you see now are the unadorned petulant lips of the defense secretary, God help us all."

Five minutes later my father was putting a seemingly affectionate hand on the defense secretary's shoulder and saying, "My dear Hud, have you met my wife and my son?"

Love thine enemies. I hated politics.

"Hud" had a damp, cold handclasp that I supposed he couldn't help. His present hair color was dark, lightly flecked with gray, and the cut was in a swept-back style straight from the films of James Bond. Distinguished. Impressive, one had to admit.

Sweet Mrs. Prime Minister appeared at my elbow and asked if I was having a good time.

"Oh, yes. Splendid, thank you."

"You look a bit lost. Come with me." She led me across the room and stopped beside a sharply dressed woman who reminded me of Orinda. "Jill, dear, this is George Juliard's son. Do look after him."

Jill gave me a comprehensive head-to-toe and stared at Mrs. Prime Minister's retreating back without enthusiasm.

"I'm really sorry," I said, "I don't know your name."

"Vinicheck. Education."

"Minister of?"

Her grim lips twitched. "Certainly."

She was joined by another woman in the best of current fashion—another Orinda clone. Secretary of state for social security.

She said bluntly, "Where does your mother get her clothes?"

I followed her gaze across the room and saw Polly talking unself-consciously to the home secretary. Polly's clothes, as always, had nothing to do with popular opinion.

Jill Vinicheck (Education) kindly said, "Your father may have a bright career in front of him, but your mother will have to change the way she dresses or she'll be clawed to bits by those witches who write about fashion in the newspapers."

The minister of social security agreed. "Your mother's skirt is the wrong length. You don't mind me telling you? I'm only being helpful. Frankly, it would be the wrong length whatever length it was. But you can pass on some tips to her from us if you like."

"Tell her," Jill Vinicheck said, enjoying herself, "always wool or silk or cotton. Never polyester."

Social Security nodded. "There's a marvelous man who could make your mother really elegant, with her long, thin figure. He totally changed the way the papers write about us now. They discuss our policies, not our clothes. And he can do it not only for women. Look at the change in Hudson Hurst! Hud frankly looked a bit of a gangster, but now he's a statesman."

"No time like the present," Jill Vinicheck said with the briskness that had no doubt propelled her up the ladder. "Our wand-waving friend is here somewhere. Why don't we introduce him to your mother?"

"Er . . ." I said. "I don't think she—"

"Oh, *there* he is," said Social Security, stepping sideways and pouncing. "Let me introduce you. . . ."

She had her hand on his arm, and he turned towards her, and I came face to face with A. L. Wyvern.

Alderney "Anonymous Lover" Wyvern. No wonder Education and Social Security had reminded me of Orinda. All those years ago his ideas had dressed her, too.

I knew him instantly, but it took him several seconds to add four years to my earlier appearance. Then his face hardened to ill will, and he looked disconcerted. My presence there was to him an unwelcome surprise. So was his to me.

Education and Social Security were looking puzzled. "Do you two know each other?" one of them asked.

"We've met," Wyvern said shortly.

His own appearance, too, had changed. At Hoopwestern I had thought him to be less than forty, but I now saw that to have been probably an underestimate. His skin had begun to show a few wrinkles and his hair to recede, and he was now wearing glasses with narrow dark frames. There was still about him, though, the strong secretive aura of introverted clout.

At the Downing Street party there was no overt sign of the sleeping anger that had nearly killed Orinda. He was not this time saying to me aloud in fury, "One day I'll get you," but I could see the intent rise again in his narrowed eyes. The extraordinary response I felt was not fear but excitement. The adrenaline rush was to fight, not flight. And whether or not he saw my reaction as vividly as I felt it, he pulled down the shutters on the malice visible behind the dark-framed lenses, excused himself, and moved slowly away.

"Well!" exclaimed Jill Vinicheck. "He's never talkative, but I'm afraid he was . . . impolite."

Not impolite, I thought. Murderous.

After the reception Polly, my father, and I all ate in one of the few good restaurants in London that had taken the din out of dinner. One could mostly hear oneself speak.

My father had enjoyed a buddy-buddy session with the prime minister. I said mildly, "I think the prime minister should ban Alderney Wyvern from number Ten Downing Street."

Polly and my father sat with their mouths open.

"He was there," I said. "Didn't you see him? He looks a bit different. He's balder, wears spectacles. But he is revered by the minister of education, the secretary of state for social security, and the secretary of state for defense, to name those I am sure of. Orinda

and Dennis Nagle were kindergarten stuff. Alderney Wyvern now has his hands on levers he can pull to affect whole sections of the nation."

"I don't believe it," my father said.

"The dear ladies of Education and Social Security told me he had turned Hudson Hurst from a quasi-mobster into a polished gent. What do you think they give Alderney in return?"

"No," my father said. "Not classified information."

I shook my head. "I'd guess that they give him attention. They listen to him and act on his advice. Orinda said years ago that he had a terrific understanding of politics. He would tell Dennis Nagle what to do, and he was nearly always right. Dennis had his feet on the upward path, and if he hadn't died, I'd think he'd be in the Cabinet by now with Wyvern at his shoulder."

My father pushed his broccoli aside. A good thing his farmers weren't watching. They were agitating for a broccoli-awareness week to make the British eat their greens.

"If he's so clever," Polly asked, "why isn't he in the Cabinet himself?"

"Orinda told me the sort of power Alderney really wants is to pull the levers behind the scenes. I thought it a crazy idea. I've grown up since then."

"Power without responsibility," my father murmured.

"Allied," I said ruefully, "to a frighteningly violent temper."

My father hadn't actually seen Wyvern hit Orinda. He hadn't seen the speed and the force and the heartlessness, but he had seen the blood and tears, and they had driven him to try to retaliate. Wyvern had wanted to provoke my father to hit him. I dimly understood, but still hadn't properly worked it out, that attacking Wyvern would in the end destroy the attacker.

AFTER Christmas that year several things happened that changed a lot of lives.

First of all, on New Year's Eve a tongue of freezing air licked down from the Arctic Circle and froze solid all of the British Isles.

Racing came to a halt, except on a few specially built all-weather tracks. Owners cursed as their training bills kept rolling in, professional jockeys bit their fingernails, and amateurs were grounded.

Claims for frost damage avalanched into Weatherbys, and in the middle of all this Evan, my boss, announced that he was leaving the firm to join a growing insurance company as managing director. I expected Weatherbys to replace him over my head, but instead they told him to spend his three months' notice teaching me his job.

During that same three months my father became the front man in an ongoing fish war, discussing at international high level who could take how many fish of such and such a species of such and such a size out of any particular area of the world's oceans. With wit and understanding, and by going to sea himself in freezing, salt-crusted, net-festooned seasickness factories, he learned the gripes and legitimate arguments of men who lived close to Davy Jones and his ever ready locker.

The press took notice. Headlines appeared: JULIARD HOOKS AGREEMENT and JULIARD IN JAPAN.

People in insurance began to say, "This Juliard person—no relation of yours, I suppose?"

"My father."

"Seems to be doing a good job for my fish and chips."

Fish and chips—the potatoes in agriculture—put my father on the map.

A television station sent a cameraman to sea with him. The cameraman, though sick the whole time, shot fearsomely memorable footage of my father hanging half overboard in oilskins above the breaking waves and grinning.

Schoolchildren recognized pictures of the "Fish Minister" instantly. His Cabinet colleagues didn't like it.

One of the top tabloids dug up the five-year-old stunning photograph of my father in mid-jump from the burning constituency offices and printed it big in a center-page spread extolling virility and the hands-on policy out on the deep blue sea.

Even the prime minister didn't much like *that*. George Juliard as

a relative newcomer with a normally quiet department in his charge was fine. George Juliard on the fast track upwards in public acclaim was a threat.

"One mustn't make a minister a cult," the prime minister said in an interview. But others talked of "leadership qualities" and "getting things done," and Polly advised Dearest George to damp it down a bit and not let his success antagonize his colleagues. My father therefore paid lavish tribute to the army of civil servants behind his fish-war solutions. "Without their help . . ." and so on and so on. He did a lot of modest groveling in Cabinet.

Towards the end of the long winter freeze the racing papers gave a lot of space to the news that Sir Vivian Durridge, at seventy-four, had decided to retire from training. The article, full of sonorous clichés like "long and distinguished career," detailed his winners of the Derby (four) and other great races ("too numerous to mention") and listed the chief owners he'd trained for ("royalty downwards") and the chief jockeys he'd employed ("champions all"). Tucked away near the end came the riveting information that according to the form book, "Benedict Juliard had for two years ridden the Durridge horses as an amateur."

> Benedict Juliard, as everyone in racing knows, is the son of George Juliard, charismatic minister of agriculture, fisheries and food. Ben Juliard won three races on horses trained by Sir Vivian, and then left.

End of Vivian Durridge. A happy retirement, Sir Vivian.

It seemed the freezing temperatures had put a brake even on adultery. Usher Rudd, still active with his telephoto lens and mean spirit, had hit a dry patch in his relentless pursuit of the unfortunate opposition member of Parliament, whose progress from bimbo to bimbo either had temporarily ceased or he had gone into hiding. Usher Rudd, sacked by the Hoopwestern *Gazette* and definitely now non grata under many flags, had all the same found a freelance market in weekly tabloids.

The motto he everlastingly lived by: Sleaze sells.

And where it doesn't exist, invent it.

The opposition member killed himself.

Shock reverberated through Parliament. Editorial-page writers, hands raised in semi–mock horror, pointed out that though adultery might be a sin, it was not, under British law, a crime. Hounding a man to despair—was that a sin? Was that a crime? Usher Rudd, smirking and unrepentant, repeated his credo again and again: If people in the public eye chose to behave disgustingly in private, the public had a right to know.

Did they? What was disgusting? Who should judge? Chat shows discussed it endlessly. Usher Rudd was either "the watchdog of the people" or a dangerous voyeur.

My father, walking with me in the woods around Polly's house, believed Usher Rudd would now be looking for another target.

"Until he's safely locked on to some other poor bastard," he said. "Just you remember how he followed us in Hoopwestern, so be very careful. He had a go at us then, and we got him sacked."

"Yes," I said, "but I'm certain you've stuck to what you wrote that day in those pacts, that you would do nothing shameful or unlawful and would cause no scandal. Rudd can't touch you."

He smiled. "Yes, I've kept my bargain. But a small thing like innocence wouldn't stop that red-haired dung beetle. Have you found your side of the promise difficult to keep?"

I shook my head. "I've kept it."

It was true, though, that the pact I'd written had shaped and inhibited what one might call my sex life. I'd had two brief but pretty satisfactory interludes, one at university, one in racing, but both times I'd drawn back from any deep involvement.

When the sun at last shone warmingly on the house in outer Wellingborough, where I lived in a granny flat built for a dear departed granny, the ceilings drizzled rain from burst pipes in the attic and then fell down completely. As major replastering was required, I packed my stuff in boxes and drove them to the office, storing them in the leg room under my desk.

Evan was stripping the office of the clutter of his five-year tenure.

He arranged a thousand files in easy order and gave me an index.

"I can't manage without you," I said.

His birdlike head inspected his nonpersonalized end of the room. "If anyone thought you couldn't, you wouldn't be taking my place."

He left in a flurry of farewell beers, and I spent the whole summer at first tiptoeing and then striding into new responsibilities, and in six swift months I shed the last remnants of boy and grew in confidence and perhaps in ability until I had settled into the person I would be for the rest of my life.

When I mentioned how I felt to Polly, she said the change was obvious and that I was lucky: Some people weren't sure who they were till the far side of thirty.

My father, who'd known who he was at nineteen, had during the early summer consolidated himself in the Cabinet and by conscientious work had converted his colleagues' jealousy into acceptance, if not admiration. George Juliard had arrived as a political fact.

I asked him about Alderney Wyvern.

He frowned. "I haven't seen Wyvern since Christmas, but he's somewhere about. I'd say Hudson Hurst and Jill Vinicheck are voting to his tune. They're both apt to say on one day that they haven't made up their minds on a point of discussion, but a couple of days later their minds and opinions are firm, and they always agree with each other. And I think those opinions are Wyvern's, though I've no way of proving it."

"And are they good opinions?"

"Sometimes *very* good, but that's not the point."

PARLIAMENT went into summer recess. Polly and the member for Hoopwestern spent the first part of the break in the constituency, working with Mervyn and Orinda. The four of them had settled into an energetic and harmonious team.

My father then took Polly around the world with stopovers in capital cities to learn about famine and fertilizers and freaks of climate, and came back with a fair understanding of how a billion people fed themselves on the blue planet. I in my little world at

Wellingborough computed numbers and risks and moved back into my granny flat when the new ceilings were dry.

Usher Rudd began stalking a bishop. Everyone except His Reverence sighed with relief.

I rode a winner in August and another in September.

Beneath this surface, although none of us knew it, little upheavals were growing and coalescing. My father had once said that they always killed Caesar, and when Parliament reconvened, the knives were ready to drive into the toga.

My father, worried, told Polly and me that Hudson Hurst intended to challenge the prime minister for the leadership of the party. Hurst, with his now polished manner, was saying that the party needed a tougher, younger leader to prepare for the big buildup towards the next general election, three years ahead.

"Alderney Wyvern," I said, "is writing the script."

Polly said, horrified, "He couldn't."

My father said, "It's Wyvern's aim, to rule by stealth."

"Then stop him!" Polly exclaimed.

But Hudson Hurst resigned from the Cabinet and announced to the world that a majority of the party in power was dissatisfied with decisions being made in its name and that he could do better.

"Stop him," Polly said again. "Oppose him."

The three of us, sitting around Polly's kitchen table, were silenced by the suddenness and size of the task. Sure, my father had aimed one day to be prime minister but had thought of acceding peacefully after a resignation, not as a contender for the ides of March.

My father, considering loyalty to be a paramount virtue, went to Downing Street and declared himself the prime minister's man. The prime minister, however, seeing that the party wanted a change, decided it was time to go just as soon as a new leader was elected. The way was now clear for my father to declare himself as a candidate for the ultimate job. The battle was now joined.

ON A harmless-looking Tuesday morning in October, I went into Weatherbys as usual and found that no one would look at me. Puz-

zled but unalarmed, I made my way into my office and found that someone had kindly—or unkindly—left on my desk a copy of *Shout!* open at the center pages.

Shout! was the weekly magazine that regularly printed Usher Rudd's most virulent outbursts. There was a photograph, not of my father, but of myself, dressed as a jockey.

The headline in huge letters read DOPE!

Underneath, it said, "Jockey son of George Juliard, self-aggrandizing minister of agriculture, fisheries and food, was fired for snorting cocaine, says trainer."

In disbelief I read the trailing paragraph.

> "I had to get rid of him," says Sir Vivian Durridge. "I could not have a glue-sniffing, drug-taking bad apple infecting my stable's reputation. The boy is no good. I am sorry for his father."

His father, the magazine said, had entered the power struggle currently rending apart the Cabinet. How could Juliard proclaim himself a paragon of family values when he had failed as a parent himself, as his only child was a drug addict?

I felt as I had in Vivian Durridge's study on that morning five years earlier—numb. I picked up the magazine and, with eyes speculatively following every step I took, went to see the chairman of Weatherbys in his office.

I needn't have taken the magazine with me. He had a copy of it already on his desk.

"It's not true," I said flatly.

"If it's not true," the chairman asked, "why on earth would Vivian Durridge say it is? Vivian Durridge is one of the most highly respected men in racing."

"If you'll give me the day off, I'll go and ask him."

He stared up at me, considering.

"I think," I said, "that this is an attack on my father more than on myself. This article was written by a journalist called Usher Rudd, who tried to discredit my father once before, in fact five years ago, when he first stood for Parliament. My father complained to the ed-

itor of the newspaper, and Usher Rudd was sacked. This looks like revenge. You'll see that this article says my father is involved in a power struggle in the Cabinet, and, well, he is. Whoever wins the struggle will be the next prime minister. Usher Rudd is determined it won't be George Juliard."

The chairman still said nothing.

"When I applied here for a job," I said, "Sir Vivian sent you a reference, and, oh"—I remembered in a blinding flash of joy—"he sent me a letter, which I'll show you."

I hurried back to the insurance office and retrieved the box full of my stuff from under my desk. I simply hadn't bothered to take it back to my reconstructed room and clutter the place up again. In that box were my father's wedding photos.

In the frame behind the picture of himself and Polly, the letter from Vivian Durridge was as clean and fresh as the day I received it. As a precaution, I made several copies and put them in one file among hundreds and took the original to the chairman.

He had already, fair man that he was, retrieved from his records the short reference that Sir Vivian had spontaneously sent. It was lying on his desk on top of the magazine.

I handed him the letter, which he read twice. "Sit down," he said. "Tell me what happened the day Sir Vivian Durridge accused you of taking drugs."

"Five years ago"—it seemed a lifetime—"my father wanted to make me face the reality that I would never be a top jockey."

I told the chairman about the car and the chauffeur and the hotel in Brighton. I told him that my father had asked me to help with his by-election campaign.

The chairman listened and at the end asked, "Who, besides you and your father, knew that Vivian Durridge had accused you of drug taking?"

"That's just it," I said slowly. "I told no one, and I don't think my father did, either. Will you let me go and find out?"

He looked at the letter again and at the reference and at the magazine article, and made up his mind.

"I'll give you a week," he said. "Ten days. Whatever it takes."

I was grateful and speechless in the face of his generosity. He merely waved me away with a gesture towards the door, and looking back as I left, I saw him slide the magazine, the letter, and the reference into a drawer in his desk and lock it.

Back in my own office, the telephone was ringing. My father's voice said, "What the hell's going on? What does Vivian Durridge think he's doing? I can't get any answer from his telephone."

The reason he couldn't get any answer from Vivian Durridge's telephone, I discovered three hours later, was because he was not in his home. The gravel in the drive was tidily raked. The porticoed front of the near mansion spoke as usual of effortless wealth, but no one answered the doorbell.

Along in his stable yard there were no horses, but the head groom, who lived in an adjoining cottage, was pottering aimlessly about. He recognized me without hesitation.

"Well, Ben," he said, scratching his head, "I never knew you took drugs."

He was old and small and bandy-legged and had loved and been loved by the great beasts in his care. The life he'd lived in their service had gone, leaving him without anchor or purpose.

"I never did take drugs," I said.

"No, I wouldn't have thought so, but if Sir Vivian says . . ."

"Where is he?" I asked. "Do you know?"

"He's ill, of course. Gone in the wits, poor old man. He was walking around the yard with me one day at evening stables, same as usual, when all of a sudden he clapped a hand to his head and fell down, and I got the vet to him."

"The *vet?*"

"I knew the vet's number." The head groom shook his own old head. "Anyway, the vet came and brought the doctor, and they thought Sir Vivian had had a stroke or some such. So an ambulance came for him, and his family, they didn't want to say he was gaga, so they just told everybody he'd retired."

"But where," I asked gently, "is Sir Vivian at this moment?"

"In the nursing home," he simply said.

I found the nursing home. A sign announced HAVEN HOUSE. Sir Vivian sat in a wheelchair, warmed by a rug over his knees.

"He's confused. He doesn't know anyone," the nurses warned me. But even if he didn't recognize me, he garrulously talked.

"Oh, dear, yes," he said in a high voice, not like his own gruff tones. "I remember Benedict Juliard. He wanted to be a jockey, but I couldn't have him. I couldn't have anyone who sniffed glue."

Sir Vivian's eyes were wide and guileless. I saw that he now did believe in the fiction he had invented for my father's sake. I asked him, "Did you ever actually see Benedict Juliard sniffing glue or cocaine or anything else?"

"Had it on good authority," he said.

Five years too late I asked him, "Whose authority?"

"Eh? What? Whose authority? Mine, of course."

The intelligence that had once inhabited the Durridge brain, the worldly experience that had illuminated for so long the racing scene, the grandeur of thought and judgment—all had been wiped out by a devastating hemorrhage. Sir Vivian Durridge no longer existed. I spoke to the shell, the chaos. I sat with him for a while, as it seemed he liked company and, even if he didn't know who I was, he didn't want me to go.

The nurses said, "It settles him to have people near him. And you're the second person, outside his family, who has been to see him recently. He is so pleased to have visitors."

"Who else came?" I asked.

"Such a nice young man. Red hair. Freckles. So friendly, just like you. A journalist, he said. He was asking Sir Vivian about someone called Benedict Juliard, who had ridden horses for him once. Oh, my goodness," the nurses said, clapping hands to surprised mouths. "Benedict Juliard. Isn't that who you said you were?"

"That's right. What would Sir Vivian like that he hasn't got?"

The nurses giggled and said, "Chocolate biscuits and gin, but he isn't supposed to have either."

I handed them money. "Give him both."

I TELEPHONED my father.

"People believe what they want to believe," I said. "Hudson Hurst will want to believe your son is a drug addict and he'll go around asserting to your colleagues that that makes you unfit to be prime minister. Well, remember what I wrote that day when we made the pacts, that I would do my best to keep you safe from attack?"

"Of course I remember."

"It's time to do it. I'm going to sue for libel."

"Who? Usher Rudd? Vivian Durridge?"

"No. The editor of *Shout!*"

After a pause my father said, "Ben, I don't like it."

"Nor do I. But if I can make a charge of libel stick to *Shout!*, Hudson Hurst will have to shut up. And there's no time to lose. Didn't you say the first internal vote in the party for a new leader is next week?"

"It is, yes. Monday."

"Then you go back to your fish and chips, and I'll take a sword to Usher Rudd."

From Durridge's place in Kent, I drove down to Exeter and to the training stables of Spencer Stallworthy. I arrived at about six thirty, when he was just finishing his round of evening stables.

"Hello," he said, surprised. "I didn't know you were coming."

"No." I watched him feed carrots to the last couple of horses and wandered over to look into the stall that had held Sarah's Future for three splendid years. It was inhabited now by a long-necked gray. Jim was there still, checking the hay nets and water buckets. All so familiar, so much missed.

The evening routine finished, I asked if I could talk to them both for a while, which meant a short drive to Stallworthy's house.

They knew my father was in the Cabinet, and I explained about the power struggle. I showed them the center pages of *Shout!* Jim blinked his white eyelashes rapidly, a sign of disturbance, and Stallworthy said, "But you never took drugs. I'd have known it."

"That's right," I said gratefully, "and that's what I'd like you to write for me. A statement that I rode from your stables for three

years and won races and showed no sign of ever being interested in drugs. I'm going to sue this magazine."

Both Stallworthy and Jim were outraged on my behalf and wrote more fiercely in my defense than I could have asked for. Stallworthy gave me a bed for the night and a horse to ride in the morning, and I left after breakfast and drove along country roads to the university.

The time since I'd graduated seemed to vanish. I parked outside the Streatham campus and walked up the steep path to the Laver Building, home of the mathematics department. After a good deal of casting about, I found my tutor—the one who had written for me the reference sought by Weatherbys—and explained what I was asking of him.

"*Drugs?* Of course, a lot of the students experiment, but you were about the last I would have suspected of getting hooked. For a start, drugs and mathematics don't mix, and your work was particularly clearheaded. This magazine article is all rubbish."

I beseeched him to put those views in writing, which he did with emphasis. I hiked back to my car and drove across country to my old school at Malvern.

There on its hillside campus I showed my onetime headmaster a copy of *Shout!* and also a copy of Vivian Durridge's letter.

"Of course I'll support you," he said without hesitation, and wrote and handed me the handwritten page to read.

> Benedict Juliard attended Malvern College for five years. During the last two, while successfully working in mathematics, he spent all breaks either riding racehorses—he won three steeplechases—or skiing, in which sport he won a European under-eighteen downhill race.
>
> In addition to those skills, he was a considerable marksman with a rifle. He shot on the school team that won the prestigious Ashburton Shield.
>
> In all these activities he showed clearheadedness, natural courage, and a high degree of concentration. It is ludicrous to suggest that he was ever under the influence of drugs.

I looked up, said "Thank you" rather feebly, and he shook my hand with a smile.

Onwards I went to Wellingborough, where I called in to see the chairman of Weatherbys to tell him what I'd been doing and what I proposed to do. After making copies of all the letters I'd collected, I drove to Wellingborough station and caught the train to London.

Shout! emanated, it transpired, from a small and grubby-looking building south of the Thames. The editor wouldn't want to see me, but late in the afternoon I marched straight into his office, shedding secretaries like bow waves. He was sitting in a sweatshirt behind a cluttered desk, typing on a keyboard of a computer. When I told him who I was, he invited me to leave.

"I am going to sue you for libel," I said, opening the copy of *Shout!* "I see from the small print at the beginning of this magazine that the name of the editor is Rufus Crossmead. If that's who you are, I'll be suing Rufus Crossmead personally."

He was a small, pugnacious man, sticking his chest out and tucking his chin in like a pugilist. I remembered how five years earlier my father had pulverized the editor of the Hoopwestern *Gazette,* but I couldn't reproduce exactly that quiet degree of menace. I left Rufus Crossmead, however, in no doubt as to my intentions. I laid down in front of him copies of the letters from Stallworthy, Jim, my Exeter tutor, and the headmaster of Malvern College, and finally the letter Vivian Durridge had sent.

"The only good defense in a libel suit," I said, "is to prove that the allegations are true. You've printed lies. It will be easy for me to establish that Sir Vivian Durridge is now hopelessly confused after a stroke and doesn't know what he's saying. Usher Rudd must have been aware of it. He was trying to revenge himself for my father having got him sacked from the Hoopwestern *Gazette.*"

Rufus Crossmead gloomily read the various papers.

"We'll settle out of court," he said.

It sounded to me as if he'd said it often before, and it wasn't what I'd expected. I wasn't sure it was even what I wanted.

I said slowly, "I'll tell you what I'll settle for. I'll settle for a retrac-

tion and a statement of sincere regret from you that your magazine's accusations were based on incorrect information. I'll settle for a statement appearing very visibly in next Tuesday's issue of *Shout!* In addition, you will send immediately—by registered mail—a personally signed copy of that retraction and statement of regret to each of six hundred fifty or so members of Parliament."

IT WASN'T enough, I thought, to defend.

I should have written in that pact, "I will attack my father's attackers." I should have written that I'd go to war for him if I saw the need.

At almost eighteen I'd written from easy sentiment. At twenty-three I saw that if the pact meant anything at all, it pledged an allegiance that could lead to death. And if that was so, it would be feeble just to sit around and wait for the axe.

It had been late on Wednesday when I'd crashed into Rufus Crossmead's editorial office. On Friday I drove from Wellingborough to Hoopwestern, and spent the journey looking back to the end of that confrontation.

I'd asked the editor of *Shout!* why he had sent Usher Rudd to see Vivian Durridge, and he'd said it had been Rudd's own idea.

"Usher—well, his name is Bobby—said he'd been asked to dig into everything you'd ever done, and come up with some dirt. He was getting frustrated because he couldn't find any sludge. He went blasting on that no one could be as careful to stay out of trouble as you had been. Then there was this announcement of Durridge's retirement, which said you had ridden for his stable, so Bobby went off on the off-chance, and he came back crowing. He said he'd got you at last. So he wrote the story, and I printed it."

"And you didn't check."

"If I had to check every word I print," the editor had said with world-weariness, "our sales would plummet."

On Wednesday, early evening, I'd phoned Samson Frazer, the editor of the Hoopwestern *Gazette.* "If you're thinking of reprinting a story about me from *Shout!,*" I'd said, "don't do it. Usher Rudd wrote it. It's not true, and it'll get you into court for libel."

Gloomy silence. Then, "I'll reset the front page."

On Thursday, with prudent speed, *Shout!*'s proprietors had written and mailed retractions to the members of Parliament. My father, attending a meeting at the House on Friday morning, found that several certified letters had already reached their targets. In addition, he gave everyone—from the prime minister downwards—a copy of Vivian Durridge's letter to me, along with a brief confirmation from himself that he'd asked Durridge to think of a way of persuading me to leave. Apparently the general reaction had been relief, though Hudson Hurst had insisted there had to be some truth in the dope story somewhere.

My father said, "I asked Hudson Hurst if he himself had sent Usher Rudd to Vivian Durridge. He denied it. He looked bewildered. I don't think he did it."

"No. I agree."

I now negotiated a roundabout. Fourteen more miles to Hoopwestern. I thought about Hudson Hurst, the ugly duckling converted to swan by scissors and razor. On television he was smooth, convincing and read his speeches from a TelePrompTer. No inner fire. A puppet.

Alderney Wyvern pulled his strings. How to stop him?

I arrived in Hoopwestern at noon and parked behind the old party headquarters. Polly had told me the charity that owned the whole of the burned building had chosen to rebuild it much as before. When I walked in, all that seemed different were heavy fire doors and a rash of big scarlet extinguishers.

Mervyn Teck was there and greeted me with ambivalent open arms and wary eyes. He was plumper than ever. He shook hands

awkwardly and glanced past me to where, on his desk, lay both *Shout!* and the Hoopwestern *Gazette.*

"I didn't expect you," Mervyn said.

"No, well, I'm sorry. I expect my father telephoned to say he couldn't get down this weekend for the 'surgery'?" Most Saturday mornings the public came to headquarters with their complaints. "You'll do fine without him."

My father, in fact, was busy in London with secretive little lunches and private dinners, with hurried meetings and promises and bargains, all the undercover maneuvering of shifts of power. I hoped that A. L. Wyvern was fully occupied in doing the same.

Mervyn gave me coffee and local news, and I read with interest what the *Gazette* had made of *Shout!* "An unfair attack on our M.P. through his son. No truth in this allegation . . . shocking . . . libelous. Retractions are in the pipeline."

"The byline in *Shout!* says Usher Rudd." Mervyn pointed. "Vicious little nerd."

"Actually," I said as his indignation boiled on, "I came hoping to see Orinda, but she doesn't answer her phone."

"Oh, dear," Mervyn said, "she went away for the weekend." He didn't know where she'd gone.

I'd made a short list of people I aimed to see. Mervyn knew where to find Isobel Bethune at her sister's house in Wales, and as she—telephoned—was not only at home but would be glad to see me, I drove to Cardiff that afternoon and discovered Paul Bethune's rejuvenated wife in a pretty town house in the suburbs.

I'd never before seen her happy. The gray lines of worry had smoothed into peaches and cream. It was she, however, who exclaimed, "How you've changed! You've grown older."

"It happens."

Her sister had gone shopping. I sat with Isobel and listened to her remembering for my benefit how Usher Rudd had uncovered her husband's bimbo affair.

"Usher Rudd just dug away and wrote it up sensationally, but it was all Paul's fault. Men are such fools. He confessed to me in

sniveling tears in the end that he'd boasted—*boasted,* I ask you—to some stranger he was playing golf with that he was having an affair his wife didn't know about. Snigger, snigger. Can you believe it? And that stranger turned out to be that weird nobody that was always hanging about round the Nagles."

"His name's Wyvern."

"Yes, I know. When Dennis died, that Wyvern person wanted to make sure Orinda got elected, so he arranged to play golf with Paul to see where Paul was weakest. I hated Usher Rudd, but it wasn't until after your father got elected that Paul told me what had happened." She sighed. "I was shattered then, but I don't care now. You're the only one who was kind to me in those days."

I left her with a kiss on the peaches-and-cream cheek and drove tiredly back to Hoopwestern for the night, staying in Polly's house in the woods.

On Saturday morning I went to the police station and asked to see Detective Sergeant Joe Duke, whose mother drove a school bus. Joe took me into a bare little interview room, explaining he was the senior officer on duty and couldn't leave the station.

He thoughtfully repeated my question. "Do I know if that fire you could have died in was arson? It's all of five years ago."

"A bit more. But you must have files," I said.

"I don't need files. Is this off the record?"

"On the moon."

"The fire started, the firefighters reckoned, in the charity shop, and the back door there wasn't bolted, and both shops were lined and partitioned with dry old wood. I suppose you heard the theory that crazy Leonard Kitchens set light to the place to frighten your father off so that Orinda Nagle could be our M.P.?"

"I've heard. What do you think?"

"It doesn't matter now, does it?"

"But still . . ."

"I think he did it. I questioned him, see? But we hadn't a flicker of evidence."

"And what about the gun in The Sleeping Dragon's gutter?"

"No one knows who put it there."

"Leonard Kitchens?"

"He swears he didn't. And he's heavy and slow. It needed someone pretty agile to put that gun up high."

"Did you ever find out where the rifle came from?"

"No, we didn't," he said. "They're so common. They're licensed and locked away and accounted for these days, but in the past . . . and theft . . ." He shrugged. "It isn't as if it had killed anyone."

I said, "What's the penalty for attempted murder?"

"Do you mean a deliberate attempt that didn't come off?"

"Mm."

"Same as murder."

"A 10-lb. penalty?"

"Ten years," he said.

FROM the police station I drove out to the ring road and Basil Rudd's car-repair outfit. I walked up the stairs into his glass-walled office that gave him a view over his workshop below.

"Sorry," he said without looking up. "We close at noon on Saturdays. Can't do anything for you till Monday."

He was still disconcertingly like his cousin—red hair and freckles and a combative manner.

"I don't want my car fixed," I said. "I want to find Usher Rudd."

He looked up, and it was as though I had jabbed him with a needle. He had a copy of *Shout!* on his desk, inevitably open at the center pages.

"That's me," I said, pointing at the photograph. "Your cousin is lying. The *Gazette* sacked him for lying once before, and I'm doing my best to get him finally discredited—struck off, or whatever it's called in newspaperspeak. So where is he?"

Basil Rudd looked helpless. "How should I know?"

"Find out," I said forcefully. "You're a Rudd. Someone in the Rudd clan must know where to find its most notorious son. When you find him, leave a message on the answering machine at my father's headquarters. Here's the number." I gave him a card.

I went next to The Sleeping Dragon to see the manager. He had been newly installed there at the time of the by-election, but perhaps because of that he had a satisfactorily clear recollection of the night someone had fired a gun into the cobbled square.

"There were so many people coming and going on that night, and I was only beginning to know who was who. Someone left a set of golf clubs in my office and said they were Dennis Nagle's, but of course, the poor man was dead and I didn't know what to do with them. I offered them to Mrs. Nagle, and she said she thought they belonged to her husband's friend, Mr. Wyvern, so I gave them to him." He frowned. "It was so long ago. I'm afraid I'm not being much help."

I left him and walked upstairs and from the little lounge over the main lobby looked down again onto the cobbled square.

Golf clubs.

Mervyn Teck, at the end of a busy morning, told me where to find Leonard and Mrs. Kitchens. On Saturday afternoon, without enthusiasm, I found their semidetached substantial house on the outskirts of the town. Mrs. Kitchens opened the front door at my ring and after a moment's hesitation for recognition said, "My Leonard isn't in, I'm afraid."

She took me into a front sitting room where the air smelled as if it had been undisturbed for weeks, and talked with bitterness about her Leonard's infatuation for Orinda. "My Leonard would have done *anything* for that woman. He still would."

"Er," I said. "Looking back to that fire—"

"Leonard said that he didn't do it."

"But *you* think . . . ?"

"The silly old fool did it," she said. "I know he did. But I'm not going to say it to anyone except you. It was that Wyvern who put him up to it, you know. And it was all pointless, as your father is much better for the country than Orinda would have been. Everyone knows that now."

"People say," I said gently, "that Leonard shot at my father and then put the gun up into the gutter of The Sleeping Dragon."

Large, unhappy Mrs. Kitchens wouldn't hear of it. "My Leonard doesn't know one end of a gun from the other! He can make plants grow, but he's hopeless at anything else."

I left poor Mrs. Kitchens and slept again in Polly's house.

For most of Sunday I sat alone in the party's headquarters waiting for Basil Rudd to dislike his cousin enough to help me, but it wasn't until six in the evening that the telephone rang.

I picked up the receiver. A voice that was not Basil Rudd's said, "Is it you that wants to know where to find Usher Rudd?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "Who are you?"

"It doesn't matter who I am. Because of Rudd's snooping, my wife left me and I lost my kids. If you want to fix that bastard, at this very moment he is in the offices of the Hoopwestern *Gazette.*" The informant disconnected abruptly.

Usher Rudd was on my doorstep. The *Gazette*'s offices and printing presses were simply down the road. I locked the party headquarters, jumped in my car, and sped through the Sunday traffic with the devil on my tail.

He was still at the *Gazette,* in mid–furious row with Samson Frazer. When I walked into the editor's office, it silenced them. They both knew who I was. Bobby Usher Rudd looked literally struck dumb. Samson Frazer's expression mingled pleasure, apprehension, and relief.

He said, "Bobby swears the dope story's true."

"Bobby would swear his mother's a chimpanzee."

Usher Rudd's quivering finger pointed at a copy of Thursday's *Gazette* on Samson's desk. He found his voice, hoarse with rage.

"You know what you've done?" He was asking me, not Samson Frazer. "You've got me sacked from *Shout!* You frightened Rufus Crossmead and the proprietors so badly that they won't risk my stuff anymore, and I've increased their sales for them over the years. It's bloody *unfair.* Now they say the story has backfired. They said it will *help* George Juliard, not finish him. And how was I to know?"

I said bitterly, "You could have seen Vivian Durridge didn't know what he was saying."

"People who don't know what they're saying are the ones you listen to."

That confident statement, spoken in rage, popped a lightbulb in my understanding of Usher Rudd's success.

I said, "That day in Quindle, when I first met you, you were already trying to dig up scandal about my father."

"Natch."

"He tries to dig up dirt about anyone," Samson put in.

"Who," I asked Usher Rudd, "told you to attack my father?"

"I don't need to be told."

Though I wasn't exactly shouting, my voice was loud and my accusation plain. "As you've known all about cars for the whole of your life, did you stuff up my father's Range Rover's sump-plug drain with a candle?"

"*What?* I'm not answering your bloody questions."

The telephone rang on Samson Frazer's desk. He picked up the receiver, listened briefly, said "Okay," and disconnected.

Usher Rudd, not a newspaperman for nothing, said suspiciously, "Did you give them the okay to roll the presses?"

"Yes."

Rudd's rage increased to the point where his whole body shook. He shouted, "You're printing without the change. I insist . . . I'll kill you. . . . Stop the presses. If you don't print what I told you to, I'll kill you."

Samson Frazer didn't believe him, and, for all Rudd's passion, neither did I. Kill was a word used easily, but seldom meant.

"What change?" I demanded.

Samson's voice was high beyond normal. "He wants me to print that you faked Sir Vivian's letter and forged his signature and that the story about sniffing glue is a hundred percent sterling and you'll do *anything* to deny it."

He picked a typewritten page off his desk.

"It's Sunday, anyway," he said. "There's no one here but me and the print technicians. Tomorrow's paper is locked onto the presses, ready to roll."

"You can do the changes yourself." Usher Rudd fairly danced with fury.

"I'm not going to." Samson put the typewritten page into my hands.

I glanced down to read it, and as if all he'd been waiting for had been a flicker of inattention, Rudd did one of his quickest getaways and was out through a door in a flash—not the door to the outside world, but into the passage leading deeper into the building, the passage down to the presses.

"Stop him," yelled Samson, aghast. "Sabotage. . . . He can destroy. . . . Catch him."

I sprinted after Usher Rudd and ran down a passage with small, empty offices to both sides and out through another door and across an expanse inhabited only by huge white rolls of newsprint, and through a small print room with two men tending clattering machines turning out colored pages, and, finally, through a swinging door into the long, high room containing the heart and muscle of the Hoopwestern *Gazette*—the monster printing presses that every day turned out twenty thousand twenty-four-page community enlightenments to most of Dorset.

There were eight presses in a row with a tower in the center. I saw wide white paper looping from press to press and in and out of inked rollers as it collected the news page by page on its journey to the central tower, from where it went up in single sheets and came down folded into a publishable newspaper, cut and counted into bundles of fifty. Two men were tending the presses, adjusting the ink flow, and slowly increasing the speed of the paper over the rollers and through the mechanism. Warning bells were ringing. Noise was building.

When I ran into the long, thundering area, Rudd was shouting at one of the men to turn everything off. The technician blinked at him and paid no attention. His colleague activated another alarm bell and switched the presses to a full floor-trembling roar. Monday's edition of the *Gazette* flowed from press to press and up the tower and down at a speed that reduced each separate page to a blur.

Samson Frazer, catching up with me as I watched with awe, shouted in my ear. "Don't go near the presses while they're running. If you get your little finger caught in any of the rollers, it would pull your whole arm in. We can't stop the presses fast enough to save an arm. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I yelled.

Usher Rudd was screaming at the technician.

Samson's warning was essential. There was a space of three or four feet between each machine where one was wholly exposed to the revolving, accelerating rollers. When the presses were at rest, the technicians walked with safety into these spaces to fit the master sheets onto the cylinders. When the presses were switched on, the danger began. An arm could be torn out, not in one jerking terror, but worse, inch by excruciating inch.

Rudd was still swearing at the technician, who looked over and saw Samson Frazer's arrival as deliverance. The presses went on roaring, and Bobby Usher Rudd completely lost control.

He knew the terrible danger of the presses. He'd worked for the Hoopwestern *Gazette*.

He grabbed the technician by his overalls and swung him towards unimaginable agony.

The technician, half in and half out of one of the lethal spaces, screamed. The second technician sprinted for refuge in the smaller print room next door. I, from instinct, leaped at Usher Rudd and yanked him backwards. He too started screaming. Still clutched by the overalls, the technician stumbled out of the fearsome gap, ingrained awareness keeping his hands close to his body. Better to fall on the floor than try to keep his balance by touching the death-dealing machinery.

Rudd let go of the overalls and rerouted his frenzy onto me. The glare in his eyes was madness. I saw the intention there of pushing me instead of the technician onto the rollers. But Samson Frazer jumped to grab him, while the technician, saved from mutilation, gave a horror-struck final shout as he made his terrified stumbling run for the door.

Rudd threw Samson off him like an irrelevance, but it gave me time to get space between me and the nearest press, and although Rudd grasped and lurched in an effort to get me back into the danger zone, I was fighting more or less for my life, and it was amazing how much strength ultimate fear generated.

Samson, to his supreme credit—and maybe calculating that any death on his premises would ruin him—helped me struggle with the demented kicking and punching and clutching red-haired tornado. It was Samson who delivered a blow to Rudd's head with a bunched fist that knocked him to the ground face downwards. I sat on his squirming back while Samson found some wide brown tape and, with my active help, circled one of Usher Rudd's wrists, and then the other, and fastened his arms behind his back in makeshift handcuffs. Samson tethered the wildly kicking legs in the same way, and we rolled Rudd onto his back and stood over him, panting.

We dragged him into the comparative quiet of the secondary print room next door and propped him in a chair. The technicians were in that room, wide-eyed and upset. Samson told them unemotionally to go back to work, there was a paper to be got out, and slowly, hesitantly, they obeyed him.

In his chair Rudd began shouting, "It's all his fault. Wyvern did it. Wyvern's the one you want, not me."

"I don't believe it," I contradicted, though I did.

Usher Rudd tried to convince me. "Wyvern wanted your father out of the way. He wanted Orinda in Parliament. He would have done anything to stop your father being elected."

"Like sabotaging his car?"

"I didn't want to do it. I would write what he wanted. I trailed Paul Bethune for weeks to find his bimbo, to please Wyvern, so that people would vote for Orinda, but messing up a Range Rover, that was too much. I didn't do it."

"Yes, you did," I told him conclusively. "Your cousin, Basil, knows you did."

Usher Rudd cursed Basil with words I'd hardly ever heard even on a racecourse, and somewhere in the tirade came a description of

how he'd wriggled under the Range Rover in the black tracksuit he'd worn to the meeting in The Sleeping Dragon. The brilliant performance my father had given that evening had convinced Wyvern that he wouldn't get rid of my father without at least injuring him badly. Wyvern had been furious with Rudd that his sabotage had been so useless.

Usher Rudd's rage slowly ran down, and he began to whine.

Samson phoned the police. Rudd shouted, "I want a lawyer."

He got his lawyer, passed a night in the cells, and on Monday morning collected a slap on the wrist (for causing a disturbance indoors at the Hoopwestern *Gazette*) from a busy magistrate who had no real conception of the danger involved.

No actual damage had been done. The newspaper had appeared as usual. Usher Rudd, meek and respectful, walked out free.

I TALKED to Joe Duke.

I said, "It was Usher Rudd who stuffed wax in the sump drain of the Range Rover and Leonard Kitchens who started the fire. Both of them were put up to it by Alderney Wyvern."

I paused. "I think it was Wyvern who shot at my father."

Joe Duke slowly nodded. "I'm not saying you're wrong. He could have carried a rifle in his golf bag with one of those covers on it that they use for clubs."

"Yes."

"And he had to have had murder in his mind to do that."

"Uh-huh."

"He was crazy."

"He still is."

Joe Duke knew my father was engaged in a serious power struggle but was dismayed when I explained about Hudson Hurst.

"You don't think," Joe said, horrified, "that Wyvern would try *again* to kill your father?"

"Wyvern's stakes are higher now, and my father still stands in his way. If my father is chosen to lead his party, I'm sure he'll be in appalling danger."

Joe said thoughtfully, "You know what? Just in case we're doing Wyvern a great injustice thinking it was he that shot at you—I mean, we've only got theory to go on, really—why don't you and I do an unofficial reconstruction? I'll use a walking stick for a gun. I'll transport it in a golf bag. And I'll carry it up into the little lounge and aim it at you while you're crossing the square, like you did that night, and I'll see how difficult it will be to put the walking stick up in the gutter. What do you think? We might come across something we haven't thought of."

"Okay."

"We'll have to do it at night," Joe said.

"It was after midnight."

"After midnight, then. I'll be off duty."

I agreed that we would meet that evening in The Sleeping Dragon and that Joe would tell the manager what we were doing.

I WENT to see Orinda, who had finally returned from her weekend and answered the telephone.

Five years had been kind to her. She looked as striking as ever, the green eyes black-lashed, the makeup smooth and blended. She was less brittle, less stressed, more fulfilled.

She called me darling with only two or three *a*'s. "Daaarling."

"Orinda." I hugged her.

"How you've grown!" she exclaimed. "I mean, not just upwards, but older."

She made us a salad lunch with Diet Coke. She knew about the power struggle going on in the party.

I said neutrally, "Did you know that Alderney Wyvern now controls Hudson Hurst like he used to control you and Dennis? Do you realize that if Hurst wins today's ballot and becomes prime minister, it will be Alderney Wyvern who effectively governs this country?"

Orinda looked horrified but shook her head. "Your father's more popular in the country."

"Don't forget, half the Cabinet would like to see my father fail after his spectacular way of fighting the fish war."

"It will be marvelous for this constituency if he wins." She smiled widely. "I never thought I would say that, but it's true."

I told Orinda about the reconstruction that Joe Duke and I had planned. I asked, "How much were you with Alderney Wyvern after the political meeting that evening?"

"I wasn't. I was angry and miserable and drove straight home."

"Do you know if Wyvern had his golf clubs with him?"

"What an extraordinary question! He always used to have them in the back of the car."

Orinda might have hated my father that night, but not enough to do him harm. She had no wickedness in her nature.

I spent a comfortable hour or two longer with her and then drove to Polly's house to wait for my father to telephone from London with the result of the ballot.

"It was all indecisive," he reported. "Basically a three-way split. We have to vote again tomorrow."

It seemed that neither my father nor Hudson Hurst had received enough votes to secure victory outright. Jill Vinicheck, the third candidate, had received the fewest votes and had been eliminated. The next ballot would be a straight fight between Hurst and Juliard, and no one was predicting who would win.

My father sounded tired. He said he and Polly were on their way to join me at the house for a quiet night. He had done all he could. Now it was up to his colleagues to choose whom they wanted.

I explained about Joe Duke and the reconstruction, and after a brief discussion with Polly by his side he said they would meet me in The Sleeping Dragon and we would eat together.

ANY thought that we might have had about a peaceful evening disappeared between the soup and the apple pie.

While neither Joe Duke nor I had made any particular secret about our reconstruction, we had not expected the manager of the hotel to broadcast the scenario. He appeared to have told the whole town. The hotel was buzzing, and people came up to my father in droves to shake his hand and wish him well.

Samson Frazer came from the Hoopwestern *Gazette* and gave my horrified father details of how Usher Rudd had spent his Sunday. Rudd himself came—free, unrepentant, bitter-eyed, and steaming with malice, glaring at my father and talking into a mobile phone.

When Joe Duke arrived, he looked aghast at the bustle and movement, but my father resignedly told him that the hotel had been packed on the night we were reproducing and the present crowd would make everything seem more real. Moreover, my father said he would walk with me across the square as he had done before, although I didn't like the idea.

Why wait for midnight? people asked. Everyone was ready *now,* and now was eleven thirty.

Because, Joe explained, half of the streetlights in the square switched off automatically at twelve o'clock and conditions had to be as near as possible to what they had been.

Joe brought in a bag of golf clubs from his car and showed everyone the long walking stick with the tartan cover that disguised it. The manager frowned in puzzlement, and I wanted to ask if he had remembered something significant, but Joe and the crowd swept all before them, anxious to get started. I would ask him later, I thought.

Midnight came. Half the lights in the square faded to darkness. Those left glowing threw shadows on the cobbles. The only lights blazing brightly were those of The Sleeping Dragon.

It was planned that my father and I would walk halfway across the square and wait while Joe aimed his walking stick out the window and yelled "Bang," and then reached up to put the stick in the gutter. People would hurry from The Sleeping Dragon towards my father as they had done before.

It all felt alarmingly real to me, but everyone was smiling.

Joe, surrounded by encouraging crowds, turned towards the staircase while I and my father walked out across the cobbles. I stopped to look back, but my father walked on, calling over his shoulder, "Come on, Ben. We haven't reached the spot yet."

I looked up at the hotel. Joe's walking stick was pointing out one of the windows, half hidden by the geraniums.

Three thoughts jammed into my consciousness simultaneously.

First, Joe hadn't had time to get up the stairs and walk along to the lounge and hide behind the curtain.

Second, the stick was pointing out the wrong window.

Third, there was a gleam on the stick and a hole, a black round hole in the end of it.

It wasn't a stick. It was a gun.

My father was ten yards ahead of me across the square. I sprinted as I had for Orinda and for the technician in the presses, without pause, without thought, with raw intuition, and I jumped in a flying tackle to knock my father down.

The bang was real enough. The bullet was real, but the happy crowd that poured out of the hotel still thought it was a game.

The bullet hit me while I was still in the air, colliding with my father, and it would have gone into his back if I hadn't been there. It entered high on my right thigh and traveled down inside my leg to the knee, bursting apart muscles and soft tissue in its path.

The force of it whirled me around, so that when I crashed to the cobbles, I was facing The Sleeping Dragon, half lying, propped on my left elbow, shuddering throughout my body. There was pain everywhere. My eyes watered with it, and my skin sweated. I'd been injured in racing falls, and I'd felt shivery and sore the night of the fire, but nothing had even begun to warn me that there was an unimaginable dimension far beyond cuts and breaks.

My father was on his knees beside me, his face screwed up with anxiety. My right trouser leg was dark with blood. The crowd from The Sleeping Dragon was running now, with Polly at their head. I could hear her agonized voice: "George! George!"

It was all right, I thought. It wasn't George.

My father held my hand.

Besides the encompassing pain, I felt remarkably ill. I wanted to lie down, to stand up, to move somehow, and I couldn't. I wanted someone to come along and shoot me again, but in the head, to give me oblivion, like they did with horses.

Time passed. Two police cars and one ambulance arrived, roof

lights flashing. The police went into the hotel. Someone from the ambulance came and, with large scissors, cut open my trouser leg.

I went on wishing for oblivion.

My leg, exposed to the dim light in the square, looked literally a bloody mess. The bullet hadn't severed the femoral artery, because if it had, I would have already bled to death. There was, however, somewhere in my mangled muscles a hard white finger-shaped length of what I understood with shock to be bone. Femur. Uncovered, but also unbroken.

The man from the ambulance hid the devastation with a large padded dressing and went back to the ambulance to summon a doctor. There were all sorts of rules about gunshot wounds, my father said.

It didn't cross my mind that I might lose my leg, and in fact, I didn't. What I lost, once everything was stitched and repaired, was the strength to ride half-ton steeplechasers over the black birch. What I lost was speed.

People came out of the hotel and got into the police cars. One of them was Alderney Wyvern in handcuffs. Joe Duke walked across the square and sat on his heels to talk to my father and me.

He said to me, "Can you take in what I'm saying?"

"Yes."

Joe said, "When I went up the stairs to position the walking stick, the hotel manager hurried after me and caught me before I reached the little lounge. He said he didn't know if it was just a coincidence, but not long before, at about eleven o'clock, a man had booked in at the hotel, and he too was carrying a bag of golf clubs. And what was slightly odd about him, the manager said, was that he was wearing *gloves*."

Joe stood up to stretch his legs for a moment, then sat back on his heels. "We heard that bang of the gun, and the manager used his passkey to open a bedroom door. Inside we found Alderney Wyvern coming towards the door carrying his bag of golf clubs, but when the manager snatched it from him and emptied them out onto the floor, all that was in it was golf clubs."

Joe went on, "He hadn't had time to put the rifle up in the gutter, but it was there, all right. He'd put the gun butt in the hanging basket with the geraniums, with the barrel pointing skywards, among the chains hanging the basket. I used the room telephone to bring my colleagues from the police station. While we waited for them, I asked how Wyvern had known about the reconstruction. How had he known that he would have a chance to shoot George Juliard?"

Joe smiled lopsidedly. "Wyvern said Usher Rudd had phoned him and told him." He stood up again.

My father said. "How did Wyvern think he would get away with it?"

Joe shrugged. "He did last time. In the commotion he simply walked away. If it hadn't been for the hotel manager, he quite likely would have done it again. But it was odd. He seemed just plain tired. There was no fight left in him. He could see he hadn't managed to finish you, and he simply gave up. We had no trouble arresting him."

"And what are you charging him with?" my father asked.

"Attempted murder," Joe said.

I faintly smiled. "A 10-lb. penalty."

"Ten years," Joe said.

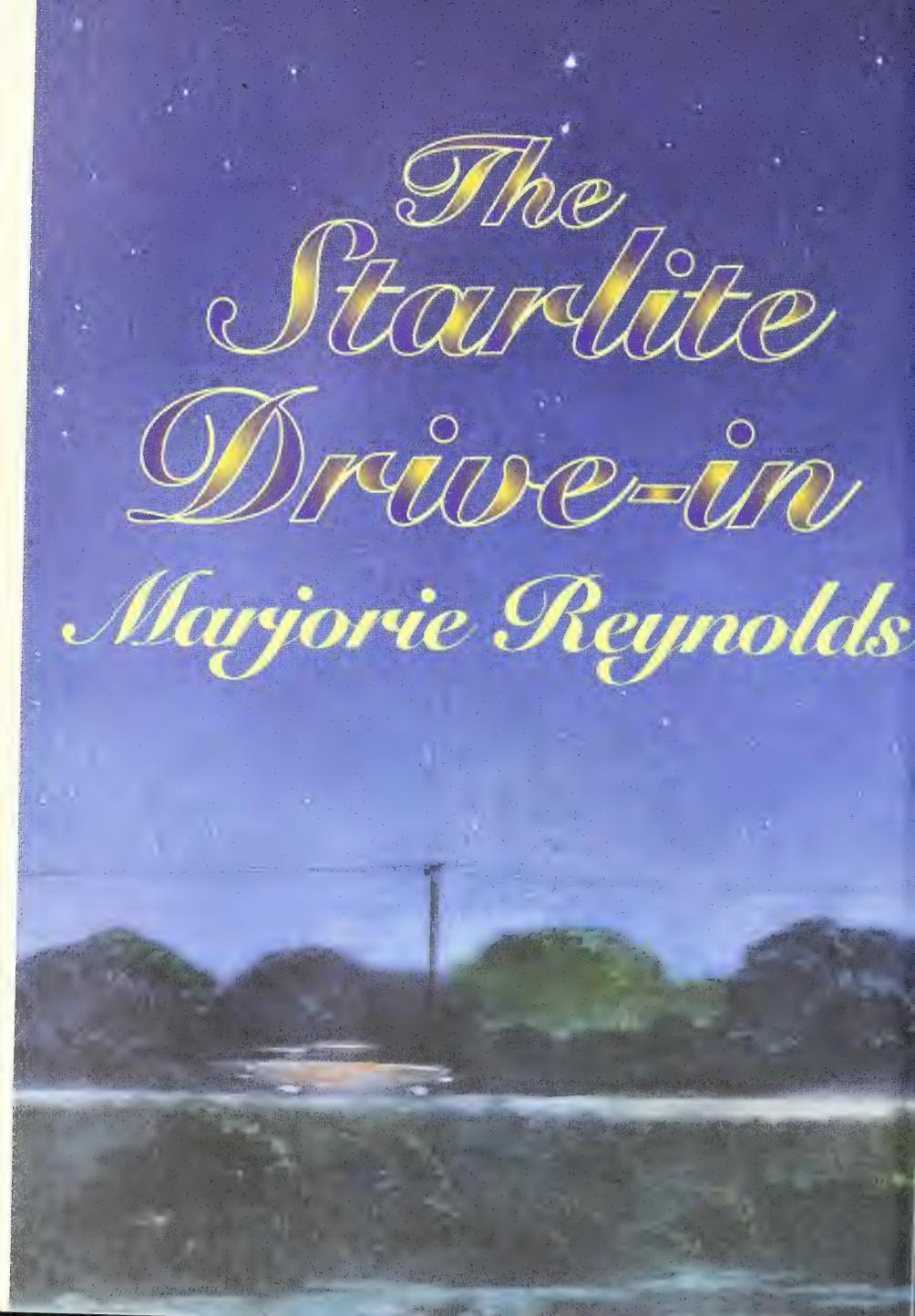
THE next prime minister held my hand.

I gripped his tight, as if he would give me comfort and security when I needed them badly.

I gripped his hand as if I'd been a little boy.

The Starlite Drive-in

Marjorie Reynolds



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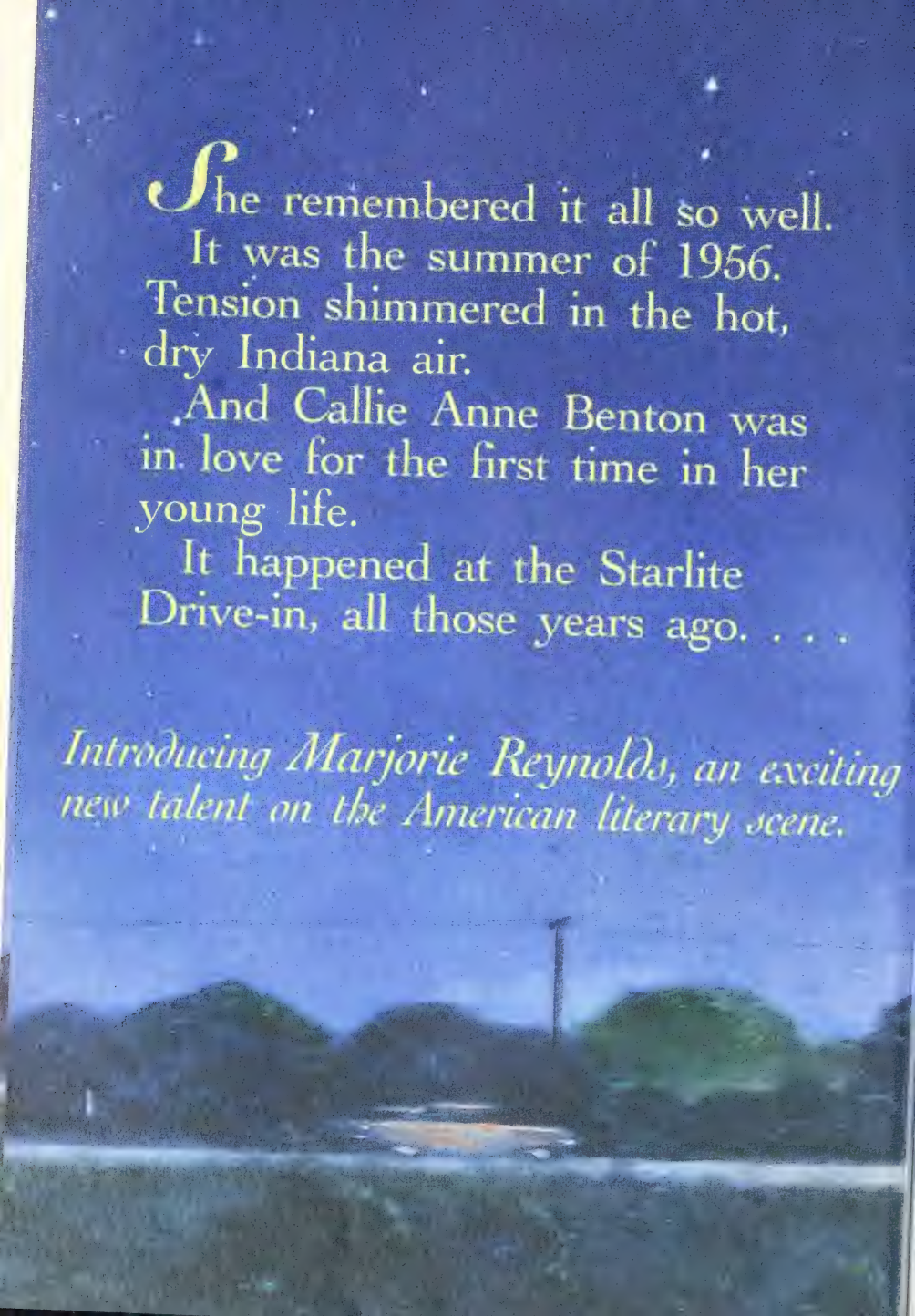

She remembered it all so well.

It was the summer of 1956. Tension shimmered in the hot, dry Indiana air.

And Callie Anne Benton was in love for the first time in her young life.

It happened at the Starlite Drive-in, all those years ago. . . .

Introducing Marjorie Reynolds, an exciting new talent on the American literary scene.

Chapter One

I WASN'T there when they dug up the bones at the old drive-in theater, but I heard about them within the hour. Irma Schmidt phoned Aunt Bliss and delivered the news with such volume that her voice carried across the kitchen to where I was sitting.

After hanging up the receiver, Aunt Bliss peered at me through her thick bifocals. "With all those farms around there, they could be the bones of some animal."

I picked up the coffee mug, drained it, then set it on the worn Formica table. "They could be."

Pursing her lips, she stared hard at me. "I know what you're thinking, but more than one person disappeared that summer."

"Yes," I said reflectively, "that's true." But my heart was beating faster.

I walked over to the sink, rinsed my cup and tipped it upside down on the drainboard next to a bowl of peaches. My aunt had lived in this house ever since I could remember. I didn't need to look at the linoleum patch to know a hand pump had once jutted from the floor, or at the white wooden cabinets to remember they concealed pulldown bins of flour and sugar. I could almost smell all the peach pies and cobblers she'd baked here the summer before I

turned thirteen. With the memories rushing back, I reached for my handbag and car keys.

Aunt Bliss blinked owlishly. "You don't have to go out there, child. Leave it be."

I was forty-nine years old, and she still called me child.

"You know I do. And I need to tell Mom about the bones before she hears it from Irma Schmidt."

She shook her head in resignation. "You always did have a stubborn streak."

Driving out to the Starlite theater, I passed subdivision after subdivision in an area that once was rural. It used to be, when the Indiana weather was especially warm, strong odors from the cow pastures hung in the air. Now the farms were gone, and the city was creeping toward the countryside on giant Caterpillar treads.

Developers were building houses on the drive-in property—tract mansions on postage-stamp lots. Workmen had unearthed the bones while digging a trench for the new sewer.

I parked alongside the dozen or so other cars at the Starlite entrance. My father, Claude Benton, Jr., had managed this drive-in. How long since I'd been back? Thirty years, maybe more.

I stood there remembering a day in late February, 1956. Dad was changing the letters on the theater sign from CLOSED FOR THE WINTER to OPENING APRIL 1 when he fell off the ladder and broke his leg. That leg was never steady again, and it was because of it that Charlie Memphis came to the drive-in that summer.

I strode past the box office, once a sturdy wooden cubicle with top shutters that folded back so the cashier could lean out to collect admissions. Now these were gone, the doors were broken off their hinges, and the little building teetered on its concrete pad. Faded candy wrappers and dead leaves crouched against the fence. Dad would never have allowed the place to look like this. Although I hadn't thought about the drive-in in years, I felt a sense of loss. We expect the places of our childhood to be eternal.

As I rounded the corner of the fence, the parking field came into view, with its few remaining rows of speaker poles perched on their

mounds like old monuments. Some were close to toppling over, and loose wires dangled from nearly all of them. The movie screen loomed in the distance, sections of it broken or missing, revealing the structure's weathered skeleton. Tears rose to my eyes as suddenly as a midwestern rainstorm, and I had to stop to brush them away.

I walked toward the flashing lights of three sheriff's cruisers. A dozen or so people—neighbors from the nearby subdivision, I suppose, and a few officials in uniform—clotted around a pit. Joining them, I gazed into a hole that lay directly in the shadow of the screen. It held a collection of bones, some still half buried. The visible ones were gray and caked with dirt. Seeing in them the form of a human skeleton, I felt a river of cold run through me.

A hand touched my elbow. "Callie Anne Benton?"

I turned to look at the gray-haired, barrel-shaped man in the sheriff's uniform. "Yes. I mean, that was my maiden name."

"Could you step over here, please?"

He led me away from the crowd. "You probably don't remember me, but I was a year behind you in school."

"I remember. Your father came to the theater once when it was robbed."

In high school Bob Jankowski had been a football star, but at some point muscle had turned to fat. Although he had his father's hefty build, his dark eyes were friendlier, less calculating than his dad's.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and waited for him to speak.

"You lived here a number of years, didn't you?"

I glanced at the yellow bungalow—an empty, boarded-up shell that vandals had spray-painted with black graffiti. "Yes. Ten altogether. We moved here when I was three years old."

The two-bedroom house at the edge of the theater grounds had been a part of my father's compensation—a "perk" they'd call it these days. During the years we occupied the house, it had been white with green shutters. Lilac bushes had provided some privacy, and a knee-high picket fence ran along the front.

For five long years my mother did not step outside its walls.

Jankowski maneuvered a wad of gum from one side of his mouth

to the other. "I was wondering, could you look at some stuff we dug up from that hole and see if you recognize any of it?"

I hesitated. "The bones are human, aren't they?"

"Oh, yes," he drawled, "and I'd say they're old. The coroner will be able to date them better when he gets them to the lab."

He led me to a dark green van. About twenty-five items, ranging from a gray button to a metal container the size of a cigar box, lay on the floor, all in clear snap-lock bags.

The sheriff handed me the metal box. "Look familiar?"

I felt a small jolt. My father had used it for petty cash.

"Think you might have seen it before?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. What's in it?"

"Don't know. It's locked."

A tall blond woman deputy about half my age walked up. "Okay, sir, if we remove the bones? The photographer's done now."

As he swung around to speak with her, I picked up one of the smaller bags and examined its contents, the way anyone with a casual interest might do. Then I did something I'd never done before. I slipped it into my purse.

When the sheriff turned back, I told him I was in a rush to pick up my daughter. "She's working at Dick's Video Emporium this summer." I smiled. Just another housewife in a hurry. "But I'll be happy to drop by your office tomorrow to go through this stuff."

His gaze flicked over me. I don't know whether he believed me or not, but he didn't stop me.

My mind was so consumed with what I had in my purse that my elderly Ford station wagon seemed to find its own way back to town and into our garage. With trembling hands I pulled out the plastic bag, opened it and held it upside down so that the dirt-blackened cigarette lighter tumbled onto my palm. As I ran my fingers over the cool, gritty metal, I slid effortlessly back into the summer of 1956.

"CALLIE Anne. Callie Anne. Come here, honey," my mother called.

Running over the gravel, I dodged speaker posts and hurdled the mounds where the moviegoers parked their cars at night. White-hot midday sunlight sparked off the mica in the rocks and glazed the drive-in with a hazy sheen.

Mom stood in the open door, tugging the bodice of her dress away from her skin so the air would cool her a bit. "You shouldn't be running like that, honey. You'll have yourself a heatstroke."

"Oh, I'm okay."

Her own cheeks were rosy from working in the hot kitchen. In the winter she wore her auburn hair loose, so that it fell down her back like a scarf, but in the summer she swept it into soft rolls and fastened them with moss-green combs that matched the color of her eyes. Tiny tendrils had escaped and lay damp against her face. She had the fine features and milky skin of a movie actress. When I looked at her, I tingled with admiration, the way I did when I saw Audrey Hepburn or Natalie Wood on the screen.

Our kitchen was fragrant with the smells of pot roast and yeast rolls. Mom hurried around the room, pulling out silverware, stirring the gravy, tossing a pat of butter into the green beans.

"Wash your hands and set the table before your father gets here, sweetheart." She glanced at the wall cuckoo clock her brother Joe had sent her from Germany after the war. It was one of those little brown houses with a yellow bird that shot out the door and squawked on the quarter hour. About every three days Dad threatened to throttle "that damned canary."

Noting the time, Mom frowned with worry. "I shouldn't have been working so long on that jingle. Don't tell him what I was doing."

"Did you write a new one?"

"Uh-huh, for Morton salt." She sprinkled flour into the gravy, then stood with the wooden spoon poised over the pan and recited, "Put Morton's in your cupboard. It's the salt of the earth."

"That sounds good, but doesn't it have to rhyme?"

"It's not done yet. It's going to be four lines."

My mother was always entering contests. She hadn't won any prizes yet, but I was sure she would someday. Then she'd be famous,

like the Jessup woman who had written a patriotic song and was going to be on *The Ed Sullivan Show.*

"Where'd you hide Dad's birthday cake?"

She gestured toward the pan cupboard. "Now don't be getting in there when he's around."

She went back to the sink to fill a measuring cup with water.

I eyed the steady flow from the faucet. "There's plenty of water now."

She nodded. "It's mostly in the evening it turns into a trickle. Your father says he can hear the pump straining when people flush the toilets in the rest rooms. That's a sure sign the well's drying up."

She drizzled some water into the gravy and stirred. Under her flowered apron the teal dress Dad and I had given her for Christmas draped smoothly over her hips. I didn't pay much attention to figures, but I knew Mom had a nice one.

Her name was Teal. She told me it was a shade of blue and green, of lakes and forests. I thought it was perfect for her. Mom believed names should make a person think of pleasant things. She said it was a shame my father's name, Claude Junior, didn't have that connection. Mom always called him Claude Junior, not just Claude, because she said the two words together had cadence.

Mom knew some fancy words like cadence. She once told me that after graduating from high school, she had wanted to go to college and become a teacher. Instead, she married my father, who said she didn't need any education, because no wife of his was going to work.

I was placing the pressed cloth napkins next to the forks when Mom let out a long sigh. "Oh, honey, just look at your blouse. Have you been down by the creek again?"

"Only for a while." I'd been trapping frogs.

"Be sure to change it before your father sees it."

As I swung around to walk toward my bedroom, I glimpsed a face pressed against the screen. I don't know what it was about Billy that always startled me that way. I used to think his eyes were too big for his face. Then I realized their size wasn't the problem. It was

their emptiness, as if the man inside them had gone somewhere else to live. But when he caught sight of my mother, his eyes glowed as if someone had struck matches inside them. "Hi, Teal."

He was a tall man, scrawny as a scrub maple, with a weathered face the color of an old copper pail. His baggy dirt-brown pants were held up by suspenders. I didn't need to look at his feet to know he was shuffling around in the laceless black shoes he always wore.

Mom laid the wooden spoon in a saucer on the counter and walked to the door. "Hello, Billy. How are you doing today?"

He peered at her through the screen. "I'm going to take dance lessons, Teal. At Miss Peabody's School of Dance in Jessup." He had a soft voice, low and wavery, and he sounded as if he were years younger than he was. The tip of his thin nose pushed against the screen. "We danced once in high school. Do you remember?"

"Did we, Billy?" She blew a wisp of hair from her face. "I cooked a pot roast. Would you like some? With a roll?"

"Your hair was shorter. And you were wearing a yellow dress."

"You wait here. I'll be right back."

She filled a plate with meat and potatoes drowned in rich brown gravy. As she headed for the door, I glanced out the window. "Mom, Dad's coming, and he's got someone with him."

She stopped and turned. "Someone with him?"

"Uh-huh."

She handed the plate out to Billy. "Just set it on the porch step when you're finished, but don't let Claude Junior see you. You know he doesn't like you being around the theater."

"Do you think you could come out later and dance?"

"No, Billy, you know I can't. Now run along."

She joined me at the window, where she turned her attention to my father and the lanky man in the white T-shirt and faded blue jeans. "My goodness, who do you suppose that is?"

I shrugged. "I've never seen him before." Dad conducted all his business from the concessions building, so it was rare for a man to come into our home.

The pointed toes of the stranger's cowboy boots kicked up little

puffs of dust. He moved easily, as though his limbs had been tied on with loose rope, while my father hobbled along beside him. Through the open kitchen window I could hear the murmur of their voices.

Mom said in a low tone, "Quick, put out another place setting."

Once inside, Dad introduced Charlie Memphis. The stranger stood in a patch of yellow light spilling through our living-room window. With his straight black hair, deeply tanned skin and high cheekbones, he put me in mind of one of those Indians you saw in old sepia photographs.

Dad jerked his thumb toward my mother. "This is my wife," he said, not mentioning her name.

Mom rubbed her hands on her apron. "How do you do, Mr. Memphis," she said, raising her eyes only as high as his belt buckle.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd drop the mister, ma'am. Most people just call me Memphis." He had a pleasant drawl that was easier on the ears than my father's flat Indiana tones.

Dad wiped the back of his damp neck with his palm. "Mr. Sooter's hired Memphis here to do some of the heavy work on the property this summer."

Mom brushed a lock of hair from her face and looked at him from under her lashes. "We'd certainly be pleased if you'd eat with us. It's nothing fancy."

"I don't want to intrude on your meal, ma'am," Memphis said.

Mom glanced toward the kitchen, concern shadowing her face. "It's almost ready. I just need to do a thing or two."

Dad kept his eyes on Memphis but gave a little nod toward Mom. "It's funny," he said. "She's always in this house. You'd think she could get dinner on time."

Mom seemed to shrink into herself, the way a snail does when it's touched. I stepped back, ducking my head.

Mom usually dished our food from the stove, but that day she served it in bowls and platters. When she removed her apron and sat down at the table, Dad glanced at her, curious, probably wondering why she was wearing her special dress. But then he never could remember a birthday, even his own.

In spite of his name, Memphis was from Louisville, Kentucky. He drew Louisville deep from his throat, so it sounded like Lullville. He thanked Mom as she passed him the rolls.

Dad glanced around the table, then frowned. "Callie Anne, your elbows."

I jerked my arms back. If Memphis hadn't been there, he would have reached over and knocked them off the table.

I suppose I was staring at Memphis. The lower half of his face was covered with a black stubble, but he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, except for James Dean. His eyes flashed sometimes brown, sometimes dark gray, depending on how the light hit them, and when he turned them on me, I nearly tumbled off my chair. At that moment I fell in love with Charlie Memphis.

I wondered how a stranger would see our house. The refrigerator was dented where Dad, after losing patience with a leaky faucet, had heaved a wrench at it. The linoleum was cracked in places and worn. I hoped Memphis wouldn't notice. Our wooden cabinets were white, except for the ones around the stove. Those had turned a light yellow, which was okay because they went with the yellow gingham curtains above the sink. Our chrome-rimmed, gray-flecked turquoise Formica table was my mother's favorite piece of furniture. Dad had ordered it from the Sears, Roebuck catalogue after considerable resistance and grumbling.

We owned a Sears stove, a Sears refrigerator and a Philco radio. We didn't own a television set, because Dad said we had all the entertainment we needed right outside our door.

Eventually Memphis's gaze fell on me. "How old are you, Sallie Anne?" His voice made me think of long grass swaying in a breeze.

I was so pleased he'd spoken to me that I could only stutter, "T-twelve." Then I added, "Thirteen in October."

Mom smiled. "Her name's Callie Anne. It's really Calla. We named her after the lily."

"Sorry. The old ears are going bad." He winked at me. "You can call me Nashville for the rest of the meal, if you want."

I must have grinned like a chimpanzee.

Now that attention had focused on me, Dad gave me a stern look. "You been playing down by the creek again, haven't you?" He looked at Mom as if to say, "Can't you keep her clean?"

Mom bit her lower lip and stared at her half-empty plate. "She's only a child, Claude Junior."

Dad regarded Mom briefly, without expression, then turned to me. "You're getting too old to be a tomboy, Callie Anne."

I ducked my head and squirmed in embarrassment. I didn't like the idea of Mom calling me a child, but I didn't like Dad saying I was a tomboy either. I wasn't sure men liked tomboys, and more than anything I wanted Memphis to like me.

Dad poked his fingernail at a bit of meat stuck between his teeth. "Ever worked at a theater before, Memphis?"

Memphis swabbed his face with the napkin. "Never ran a projector if that's what you mean."

Dad chuckled. "No, you wouldn't be running the projector. That Simplex Magnarc's a touchy piece of equipment." He broke two dinner rolls in half and slathered butter and raspberry jam on them. "There's plenty else to do around here, though. Some fool's always running over a speaker pole. Or a pipe in one of the rest rooms springs a leak."

"More pot roast?" Mom offered Memphis the platter.

He shook his head. "Thanks, but I'm full, Mrs. Benton."

The color in Mom's cheeks deepened. "Please, just call me Teal. I still think of Mrs. Benton as Claude Junior's mother."

If she had looked at my father, she would have seen him frown. I guess he thought she should have stuck to her married name.

Dad hauled out his pack of Chesterfields, tapped one of the cigarettes several times on his chrome lighter and lit it. He leaned back in his chair, one hand holding the cigarette. People said I looked like him, and I tried to see it now in the ruggedness of his face. I had his sturdy, dimpled chin. My eyes were the color of milk chocolate, just like his, but the stick-straight hair that hung down my back in a ponytail was a honey-colored blond, not brown. Mom said it would probably turn dark later.

She jumped up now, grabbed a clean ashtray from the windowsill and set it on the table.

Memphis shook the last cigarette from his crumpled pack, stuck it between his lips and lit it. I liked the way he cupped his hand around the tip, as though a hard wind might blow out the flame. I'd seen John Wayne do that. In *Red River,* I think it was.

Mom carried the dirty plates from the table, then brought out the cake, with blue candles stuck crookedly in the white icing. She turned a radiant smile on Dad. "I hope you saved room."

Dad raised his hand as if pushing her away. "Aw, jeez, Teal, why'd you do that? That's family business. Memphis's not interested in watching some fool blow out candles."

The smile slid off my mother's face. "But Claude Junior, we have to celebrate your birthday."

Dad braced his leg with his hand and rose. "We haven't time now. We've got to get working."

As he headed for the door, Mom stood there, still holding the cake, her gaze on the floor. Her voice was barely audible. "It's lemon. My mother's recipe."

Memphis rose slowly. He leaned toward her, his hand resting on the table. "That was a fine dinner, Teal. We can eat the cake later."

Dad pushed open the screen door. "Come on, let's go."

Memphis hesitated. Then, without another glance at my mother, he followed Dad out.

Almost in slow motion, Mom put the cake down, hunched her shoulders and folded her arms tightly across her chest. The way she looked, there might have been two strong hands pushing her down.

I DIDN'T expect Memphis to come back. People are always saying things they don't mean, just to be polite. But he turned up on our doorstep around three o'clock, wearing a battered gray Stetson tipped back on his head. "Thought you might bundle up some of that lemon cake for Claude and me."

He must have taken Mom by surprise, because she stood there for a minute just staring at him. "Why, yes," she said, her hand still

resting on the door handle. She eventually remembered her manners and invited him in.

He removed his hat and settled into a kitchen chair while Mom went for the cake and I slid into place beside him. He nodded at me. "Hello there, pardner."

I scooted in and perched my elbows on the table. "Hi."

"Have a taste while I'm putting this together," Mom said, handing him a plate with a fork and one of the cotton napkins she pressed daily into neat squares.

He looked at her with a half smile. "Are you trying to suggest I need fattening up, Teal?"

She turned away, reddening. "Why, no, I just . . ." Her voice trailed off.

He sliced off a chunk of cake with the side of his fork and lifted it to his mouth, still watching her. "I can see that if I stay around here, I'll find a lot of things to appreciate."

With his hand folded over the fork like it was a weapon, he polished off the rest in three bites and wiped his face with the napkin. "I had an aunt Lovene who used to make a lemon cake, but it don't even compare to this one. You ever enter it in the fair?"

Mom shook her head. "Oh, no. I haven't been to the county fair in . . . in a while."

He poked at a few crumbs with his fingertip and licked them off. "I don't mean any little old local doings. You could win a prize at the state fair with this one."

"No, I don't think so," Mom murmured, her head bent low.

He leaned his chair back, tilting up the front legs. She didn't say a word, although I always got into trouble for doing that. I inched closer to him, sitting so near I could smell him. I breathed in, noticing that although he used cigarettes, he didn't have my father's harsh smokiness. He smelled like wood—oak or maple, maybe. I'd spent a lot of time in trees, with my nose pressed against their cool, rough bark. It was an earthy smell I knew as well as any other.

He carried his plate to the sink and picked up the sack and a thermos of iced tea. "Thanks for the cake, Teal."

She smiled, a gratitude in her expression I couldn't remember ever having seen before.

From the window we watched him cross the parking field, his slouchy gray hat pushed back on his head. The late afternoon sunlight brushed his side, and he cast a lengthy shadow, making it look as if there might have been two of him. Eventually he disappeared into the concessions building.

Chapter Two

EMPHIS set to work painting the concessions building the very next day. The paint was the color of Pepto-Bismol. Just looking at it made me sick. Dad said Mr. Sooter chose it, so I suppose it was on sale.

Although it was only June 6, it was already shaping up to be one of those hot, humid Indiana summers when the perspiration forms a band around your hairline and your blouse sticks to you like wet tissue paper. I stood in the shade of a poplar tree for a while and watched Memphis. When he took off his white T-shirt, I sighed. When he dropped his paint rag from the ladder, I handed it back up to him.

Halfway through the morning he stepped down from the ladder and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the flat of his thumb. "So what does a kid do for fun around here?"

I jumped up, surprised that he was speaking to me. "Well, mostly I read, and watch movies, of course."

"I bet your friends wish they could live here."

"I guess." I didn't want to tell him I didn't have many friends. We were twelve miles from Jessup, which didn't make it easy to go visiting. But the real problem was, I just couldn't get excited about what the other girls were interested in. They sat around curling each

other's hair and giggling about boys. Betty Jo Babcock, Edwina Vandenburgh and some of the others came to the drive-in occasionally. I was friendly toward them, but I didn't go out of my way to look for them. I heard my aunt Bliss tell Mom that I was probably just a loner.

Memphis wiped his hands on a rag and looked over his shoulder toward our house. "Guess you don't get away from the drive-in much, then."

I shook my head. "Only when Dad goes into Jessup."

"What about your mother?"

"Huh?"

"Doesn't she ever drive into town?"

I picked up a popcorn bag that had drifted against the wooden bench next to the concessions building. "Course not," I said, crumpling it into a ball. "She doesn't know how to drive. She always stays in the house anyway." I tossed the paper ball in the air, trying to steal glances at his bare chest at the same time. The black hair there curled and twisted, then dove in a dark line toward blue jeans that rode low on his hips.

I've always been pretty good at catching things, but suddenly that rumpled bag shot off on a trajectory all its own. In dismay I lunged for it and smacked against him, trapping it between his torso and my neck. My face pressed against his warm, bare skin. I jerked back as if I'd hit scorching metal.

He reached out and steadied me. "She must leave it sometimes."

I touched my fingers to my face. "Wh-what?" I couldn't even think what he was talking about, and I certainly couldn't look at him, at least not while his naked flesh still branded my cheek.

"Your mother. She can't stay in the house all the time."

I glanced at him from under my lashes. His dark eyes looked perfectly serious. "Well, she does," I said. "Dad drives into town for groceries, for everything, except the stuff Aunt Bliss buys."

"Why doesn't she go out?"

I nudged the wooden ladder with the toe of my shoe, not looking at him. "She doesn't like to. She can't breathe, and her heart

pounds. A long time ago I heard the doctor tell Dad it was nerves." I stopped, wondering if I'd betrayed her. I looked up at him. "You won't say anything, will you? She feels bad about it."

"I won't mention it." He picked up the paint bucket and the pink-coated brush. "Seems a shame, though. A person can't appreciate flowers or a sunset from inside a house." He squinted in the direction of the house. "Can't imagine being shut up like that."

IT TOOK Memphis two and a half days to paint the concessions building. When it was finished, it looked like the inside of a watermelon that's been left out in the sun too long. While he washed the windows, I stood at the base of the ladder, telling him about junior high school, the stupid boys there, my favorite movies, the books I'd read, every boring little detail of my life. He didn't say much unless I asked him a question, but he was a good listener.

I dug a line in the dirt with my shoe. "We don't even get to see a movie until it's played in the big cities first, like Indianapolis and Terre Haute. When it does come here, we have to watch it seven nights in a row. And if it's making a lot of money, it runs for two weeks. Even longer sometimes."

"You know the story pretty well by then."

"Yup." I recited a scene from *On the Waterfront* by heart.

"That's not bad," he said, polishing the glass with a crumpled newspaper.

I jumped over a cinder block, trying to land in a preplanned spot the way I would hopscotching. "Hey, that's nothing. I can watch a movie from our kitchen window and read the actors' lips. I can tell my mom every word they're—"

I swung around, and Dad caught me by surprise, thrusting a bushel basket in my arms. "Callie Anne, make yourself useful."

I groaned. One of my chores was picking up litter. Before Memphis came, I stayed away as much as possible during the day to avoid the work.

As I toted my basket toward the kids' play area, a 1948 Dodge pickup roared into the drive-in, spewing up a cloud of gray dust.

"It's Aunt Bliss," I yelled, dropping the basket and running breakneck toward the house.

Aunt Bliss was Mom's sister. She was a big-boned woman with a stride like a man's. She and Mom had the same color hair, but otherwise they were as opposite as could be. My aunt fastened her straight mane back with a rubber band and didn't care if tufts of it stuck straight out. She wore wire-rimmed glasses that left shiny indentations on the bridge of her long nose. Aunt Bliss lived in Boagle Corner, about forty miles to the south, where my uncle ran an auto-repair business. Every week or two she dropped by, not bothering to call ahead. She knew Mom would always be home.

Dad, strictly a Ford man, disliked my aunt's Dodge truck even more than he disliked her. It was black except for one fender, which was primed a khaki brown. A winding crack snaked across its windshield, and the body had so many dents it resembled an egg carton. But its real problem was its unreliability. The last time it broke down, Dad had bellowed, "Hell's bells, Bliss, can't Augie keep his own vehicle running?"

I'd heard him say to Mom he didn't know how Uncle Augie put up with my aunt. "She doesn't even look like a woman in those bib overalls. I'll be damned if I'd allow my wife to cavort all over the countryside like that."

Aunt Bliss didn't bother to wave at Dad but just charged into the house. When I got there, she was laying out some printed cotton material on the kitchen table and Mom was exclaiming how pretty it was. It was a light chintz with tiny white flowers on a blue-green background.

Mom reached into the cupboard for the Hershey's cocoa tin where she kept her pin money. "It's awfully nice. What do I owe you?"

"Why, nothing, doll. It's my treat. It was on sale. I gave hardly anything for it." She walked over to the window, pulled a red bandanna handkerchief from her overalls and trumpeted vigorously into it. "Who's the fellow out there with Claude Junior?"

Mom moved next to her, and I scooted behind them. Memphis had stopped working and was shrugging into his T-shirt. "His

name's Charlie Memphis. Mr. Sooter's employed him to do some of the heavy work around the drive-in this summer."

"Where's this Memphis fellow bunking?"

"Upstairs in the concessions building."

"Has he got a car?"

"I don't believe so."

Aunt Bliss snorted. "A drifter, huh?"

Mom didn't answer, but the muscles at the corners of her mouth tightened. My aunt's hawkish eyes watched her.

They didn't say anything for a moment, an odd little silence for the two of them.

My aunt gestured toward the stove. "What you got in there?"

"Oh, my gosh, I forgot." Mom grabbed the pot holders and yanked open the oven. She lifted out a pie and set it on the stovetop.

Leaning over, my aunt inspected it through her bottle-thick glasses. "Looks done just right. What is it? Pumpkin?"

"Sweet potato. I had some I had to use up."

Aunt Bliss sniffed it. She imitated a man's gruff voice. "It'd better not have carrots in it. You know how I hate carrots."

Mom started giggling. Soon they were whooping with laughter, until the tears rolled down their cheeks and my aunt had to remove her spectacles and wipe her eyes with the red bandanna. I was completely mystified.

Aunt Bliss collapsed into a kitchen chair. "Land sakes, I haven't had a belly laugh like that in a long time."

Mom fell into another chair, clutching her arms around her middle. "Me neither. That does bring back memories, though."

Aunt Bliss started chuckling again. "Oh, Lordy, Ma sure could be ornery sometimes."

After a minute or two their laughter died away, and Mom's eyes got a sad, distant look. "It wasn't funny, you know. She may have tricked him good, but she paid for it when he saw the carrot tops in the garbage."

"Beat her so bad she couldn't open her eyes for a week."

I vaguely remembered Grandma Willard, a bony white-haired

woman who lived on a farm and shuffled around in ragged slippers with daisies on them. I didn't know my grandfather at all, but I'd heard about his drinking and bad temper.

Mom glanced at me as if she'd just realized I was there. She caught my aunt's gaze and nodded slightly in my direction.

Aunt Bliss eyed me. "Aw, she needs to know about men like that. Callie Anne, don't ever marry a man who hits you."

"I won't."

Aunt Bliss, her unruly eyebrows arched, stared directly at my mother. "And don't ever marry a man who treats you like a sorry speck of dirt."

Mom drew her mouth into a thin line. "Bliss."

Aunt Bliss flapped a hand at her. "Well, shoot, I don't care if Claude Junior did have a rotten stepdad. That isn't any excuse. A lot of men grew up just as hard, and they aren't as mean-spirited as your—"

"Bli-iss." Mom rolled her eyes.

My aunt stood and planted her hands on her ample denim-covered hips. "Well, it's true. She's got to know these things before she gets married."

"She's only twelve."

I stretched as straight as I could. "Thirteen in October."

Aunt Bliss squinted at Mom. "How old were you when you married Claude Junior? Sixteen?"

"Eighteen."

"Eighteen and foolish."

Mom shot right off the chair. "I was not. I knew what I was doing. Why, Claude Junior was so handsome and charming a lot of women would have been happy to—"

Aunt Bliss snorted. "Lord amighty, hon, you'd have done just about anything to get out of that house. I would have too. Grabbed the first man that had a decent job and showed a smidgen of kindness." She picked up her black handbag with an air of finality.

Mom stood too, her hands fidgeting with a pot holder. "Oh, don't leave yet, Bliss. Stay and have some pie and coffee."

"I'd love to, sweetie, but I can't." She gave her a firm hug. "Got to drive into Jessup to pick up some parts for Augie."

After Aunt Bliss left, Mom said, "Ask your dad and Charlie Memphis if they'd like to come in for some pie."

I trotted out to Memphis and asked him first.

He climbed down from the ladder and bent over to tap the lid on the paint can with the wooden handle of his brush. He stood and stared long and hard at our house across the dusty drive-in field. "I'd never say no to sweet-potato pie."

I glanced around. "Memphis, do you know where my dad is?"

He cocked his thumb upward, toward the concessions building's second-story window. "He had some problems with the projector last night."

I walked up the steep flight of stairs to the projection booth. At the top was a small landing and two doors, one leading to Memphis's room, the other to the booth. I could hear a movie Dad was running to test the projector.

I pushed open the door and saw Dad stab out a cigarette in an ashtray overflowing with butts. "Where you been the last few nights?" he said. "You haven't come up here."

I studied some black scrape marks on the nearby wall as if they might have been primitive drawings in a cave. "Saw a couple of kids I knew and was talking to them." I didn't want to tell him I'd been following Memphis around.

The place where my father spent his evenings was dreary, even in the daytime. Other than the projection equipment, the only item of interest was a Norman Rockwell painting on the wall. It wasn't a real painting, just a framed cover from *The Saturday Evening Post,* but my dad liked it because the people looked real. I had spent a lot of evenings in this room with him, debating whether Jerry Lewis was funnier than Lou Costello, or whether Henry Fonda was a better actor than Jimmy Stewart. Dad always said Henry Fonda, but I said Jimmy Stewart because he could be funny or serious. We would go back and forth that way, watching the projector's white fog scatter moving pictures across the screen.

For as long as I could remember, I was fascinated with the way motion pictures danced in the air. When I was a little kid, I used to think the images existed somewhere out there in the night and my dad simply caught them and cast them onto the screen for everyone to see. Then he told me how it worked. No matter. I knew any way you explained it, it was magic.

I couldn't think how to tell Dad I'd found something more interesting now, outside this cramped room.

He had picked up a tiny screwdriver and was poking at the projector's innards.

I leaned closer. "What's wrong with it?"

"These carbon rods aren't feeding right." He pointed with the screwdriver at some tiny metal pieces. "I'll have to remove the gear housing and clean the whole thing out."

"Uh-huh."

I watched him fiddle with the rods. His fingers were stained black from the carbon.

"Mom made sweet-potato pie. She wants you to come have a piece. She invited Memphis too."

He didn't answer. His gaze was fixed on the projector.

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Mom wants to know—"

He frowned but didn't look up. "I heard you."

As I backed toward the door, I tripped over three metal film cans on the floor. They clanged and banged together, and I fought to keep my balance.

Dad's head jerked up. "Callie Anne, can't you watch where you're walking? You have feet the size of gunboats."

I stared down at them, thinking Memphis also must have noticed how big they were. I felt my face go hot with shame. I started to tiptoe out of the room.

"Callie Anne?"

I jumped a bit, thinking I must have done something I shouldn't have. "What?"

"Tell your mom I'll be there soon."

I shut the door behind me. On the landing I stared at the door to Memphis's room. It was open. I chewed my bottom lip, thinking I'd sure like to see what he'd brought with him. Of course, I wouldn't have peeked in if the door had been closed. But the way it was, well, it didn't seem so bad. I placed my hand on the knob and gave a little shove, hoping the hinges wouldn't creak.

The room held a sagging, coiled-spring bed frame with a thin mattress, where Memphis had tossed his bedroll. A single bare bulb hung from an overhead fixture. Celery-colored paint was flaking off the walls, and roof leaks had left orange stains on the ceiling and warped the wooden floor in places.

A partially deflated duffel bag rested in the corner, and a few folded shirts, two pairs of jeans and some cotton underwear—not white like my dad's but a dull gray—lay on a battered wooden table. I'd never seen any undershorts that didn't belong to my father. I suddenly felt wicked being there. Releasing my breath, which I hadn't even realized I'd been holding, I backed out and cracked the door the way it'd been before.

I ran all the way to the house, vaulting the dirt mounds and slapping my sturdy brown shoes hard against the sand and gravel. By the time I reached the back door, I was out of breath. Memphis was sitting at the kitchen table talking to Mom, whose cheeks were flushed a deep rose.

It seemed to take an effort for her to pull her gaze away. "Wash your hands, Callie Anne."

Avoiding Memphis's gaze, I darted toward the bathroom and scrubbed my hands, wondering how they could get so dirty when I hadn't been digging in the mud or playing with frogs. As I walked back into the kitchen, I heard Mom say, "A penitentiary? Wasn't that dangerous?"

Memphis shook his head. "Nah, you'd be surprised. Most of those fellows ain't much different from you and me."

Mom raised her eyebrows. "Most of them?"

"Well, we did have a convict named Benny assigned to our

drilling crew. Never said much, but he was a darn good worker." Memphis gestured toward the center of the kitchen like the man Benny might have been sitting right there. "One day we were perched on a couple of upturned buckets eating our lunch when I said, 'Benny, what are you doing time for?' I thought he'd say he'd embezzled money, some quiet little crime like that. He just stared from behind his little round glasses and finally said, real casual-like, 'Killed my wife and my father-in-law. Woulda killed my mother-in-law, too, if she hadn't got away.' "

Mom blinked. "Well, I guess you were careful not to upset him."

I think my jaw must have dropped to my chest. I slid into a chair and gazed at Memphis. Already I knew the hollows that shaded his face, every ropy muscle in his long arms and the tiny blades of white light deep inside his dark eyes. It was as if an actor from the most exciting movie in the world had wandered into our kitchen, and at night I took this picture of him to bed with me and replayed it through my head.

Mom looked out the window. "You did tell your father about the pie, didn't you, honey?"

I couldn't take my eyes off Memphis, but I nodded. "Uh-huh. He said he'd be here in a minute."

Mom set the pie on the table, alongside four of Grandma Willard's china plates. "Why don't I just cut you a piece right now, Charlie Memphis?"

If he noticed that she used his entire name, he didn't show it.

His gaze swept over the pie. "Sweet potato's just about my favorite—that and berry."

"Now, that is my favorite," Mom said in a light, almost excited voice. "Any kind of berry. Strawberries, raspberries. I think I could live off them in the summer." She turned to get a knife from the drawer, then glanced out the window. "Here he comes."

My father was trotting stiffly across the gravel like a three-legged dog, the tail ends of his white theater manager's shirt working loose from his brown slacks as he limped along. Once inside, he washed his hands at the kitchen sink and tucked in his shirt. The pipes rat-

tled as though straining to bring up water from our near-dry well. Dad lowered himself into a chair, smelling like an odd combination of stale cigarette smoke and Ivory soap.

Mom slid a plate in front of him. "Charlie Memphis has been telling us about working up in Michigan at the state penitentiary."

Dad spooned sugar into his glass of iced tea. "Lived in Michigan, did you? I wouldn't mind that. Sure is a pretty place."

Memphis agreed. "But cold as a witch's— Cold as a deep freeze in winter."

Dad picked up his fork. "Yeah, but it's got all them trees and lakes. Jeez," he said abruptly. "I'd move up there if I wasn't tied down"—he stared at my mother—"by a ball and chain."

Her cheeks flamed.

With an easy casualness Memphis directed his gaze toward the pitcher on the counter. "I'd like more of that iced tea, Teal, if you can spare it. I'm dry as a creek bed in a drought."

"Of course," she murmured, jumping up and grabbing the pitcher.

Dad's voice was thick. "Stuck here like one of the convicts in your penitentiary. Right, Memphis?"

"Well . . ." Memphis drew the word out. "I don't know, Claude. I did leave there and head down here."

With arms as stiff as tree branches Mom poured his drink and sat back down.

Dad laughed bitterly. "Yeah, but at least you could travel around. Isn't that right, Teal?"

Mom studied her plate and brought a bite slowly to her mouth.

Memphis stood and brushed his hand quickly against the table, so that his fork clattered to the floor. His eyes went black. "Leave her alone, Claude."

There was an uneasy silence, and I wanted to fade, to disappear the way actors do when light hits the movie screen. Dad looked at Memphis with surprise. My mother didn't lift her head. A damp wisp of auburn hair lay like a coiled spring across the nape of her neck.

Memphis's gaze swept over her. "There'd be men who'd trade with you," he said without looking at Dad. He picked up the fork and laid it on the table. "Thanks for the sweet-potato pie, Teal. That's just about the best I ever ate, and that's saying a lot for a southern boy." He walked out the screen door without another word to my father.

Chapter Three

MY FIRST home was not the Starlite but the Magic Carpet Drive-in. Up to the time I was three years old, we lived in a one-bedroom apartment that was built into the wooden framework of the Magic Carpet theater screen. Mom said all the apartment's windows and doors faced a pasture. That's probably why I don't remember any of that time. I didn't see the movies, their bigger-than-life images shaping my memories.

However, I have an early mirror-sharp recollection of myself at the Starlite. Standing straight in my crib, my hands clutching the wooden railing I had notched with my baby teeth, I watched headlights streak across the walls and blink off one by one as cars settled on the gravel mounds. I have no idea what movie played that night, but I stood motionless, mesmerized by the silent shapes that flashed and danced just beyond my window.

Dad worked hard during those years, managing the Starlite seven nights a week from April 1 through the end of September—sometimes later if the weather held. In the off-season he worked as an oiler for the county, maintaining snowplows and other heavy equipment. He hated those cold winter months.

When I was around six years old, I first became aware of what I called—in my own mind, at least—the wish box. I suppose I called

it that because it made me think of the Sears, Roebuck catalogue, which around our house we referred to as the wish book. Every Sunday morning, summer or winter, Dad rose an hour earlier than usual, pulled out his square brown cardboard box from the hall closet and set to work on its contents. It contained brochures he'd requested from the chambers of commerce of about two dozen towns stretching from Texas to California. He sat on a straight chair in front of the living-room davenport, unfolded them and spread them all out, some flapping onto the armrests. They included statistics about population, weather and local industry. Color photos highlighted such major landmarks as community swimming pools and old Spanish missions. He said these southwestern towns were the places to build a drive-in theater. With their endless summers a person could operate year-round.

Every once in a while he'd point his nicotine-stained finger at the cloud-free blue sky and deep green palm trees in one of the pictures, and he'd say to my mom, "How'd you like to live there, hon?" And she'd smile and nod.

But it didn't happen, of course. The direction of our lives changed during the summer of 1951. I was seven.

I remember Mom and me riding into Jessup with Dad and shopping at Miller's Department Store. She looked cool and fresh in her blue going-to-town dress and wrist-length white gloves, a straw handbag tucked under her arm. Hands sticky with perspiration, I fingered the fine satin nightgowns on the lingerie table at the store. The saleslady frowned.

I slid past the brassiere display to a cash register, where I could watch a clerk fold money and receipts into a canister and dispatch it through a tube to an office on the mezzanine. The tube made a gulping, swooshing sound.

I was waiting for the canister to spit back out when I heard a soft moan. On the other side of the white brassieres my mother stood glassy-eyed and panting.

I reached her about the same time the saleslady, Mrs. McGarry, did. "Are you all right, Mrs. Benton? Do you feel faint?"

Mom didn't answer. Her hands were clasped across her chest, directly over her heart. Her eyes were as flat and dark as pond water. The rigid way she stood, her legs might have been bolted to the store's wooden floor. She looked like someone who sees a train thundering down on her but can't save herself. I felt the hair on my arms rise on end.

Mrs. McGarry turned to me, squinty with concern. "Where's your father?"

"Down the street, in Mr. Sooter's office."

"Go get him. I'll call the doctor."

When I returned with Dad, my mother, her cheeks a feverish pink, was seated in a straight-backed wooden chair. All the terror had fled, leaving the worst kind of embarrassment. A chisel-faced man who wasn't our usual doctor was standing over her, listening to her heart with a stethoscope.

Some of the shoppers wandered toward the lingerie section, pretending to examine the merchandise but stealing looks at her. The store manager scuttled around, assuring people she was just fine, but every once in a while he gave her a nervous glance. I suppose he thought she was bad for sales.

The doctor returned the stethoscope to his black bag with quick, almost impatient movements. The underarms on his white dress shirt were damp patches, and he smelled like Old Spice.

He cocked his head at Dad. "You her husband?"

Dad nodded, his eyes cutting across Mom. "What happened?"

The doctor shrugged, his attention back to the equipment in his bag. "Nerves. That's all. A touch of hysteria brought on by the heat." He straightened and ran a finger along the inside of his collar. "Keep her out of the sun for a while."

Mom hadn't been in the sun, at least not any more than the rest of us.

Dad took her by the elbow and guided her out of the store. I sat between them in the truck, the rough bench-seat upholstery prickling the back of my legs. Dad shoved the gearshift into reverse with more force than necessary. "Nerves. What does that mean?"

Mom's gaze was nailed to the purse in her lap. "I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know? We can't afford a doctor for something you don't know."

She shook her head, not answering. Tears splashed onto her handbag and soaked into the straw. I burrowed my head against her arm, inhaling her rose cologne and patting her hand the way she might have done for me.

I guess Dad thought that dwelling on Mom's attack of nerves would only make it worse. We didn't talk about it, and to make sure it wasn't repeated, Mom stopped going into town.

THAT fall Mom and I still occasionally walked down the road to buy eggs from one of the farmers on Logan Highway, which bordered the front side of the Starlite Drive-in. During one of those outings we came to the gray concrete bridge that spanned the White River. It was September, and the hand-size leaves on the trees that arched over the water blazed yellow and red. Two identical-looking towheaded boys leaned over the railing, their fishing poles dangling in the calmer shallows near the bank. I recognized them from school. They were the Moen twins, a year older than I was, and they shared worm bait from a rusty green coffee can at their feet.

A few yards from the eastern end of the bridge, Mom slowed down. When I realized I was outpacing her, I turned. "What's wrong?"

She didn't answer but got that same blank, terror-struck look in her eyes that she'd had in Miller's Department Store.

I felt my breath quickening. "Mom?"

I couldn't think what to do. The Moen twins were staring now. I stepped between her and them, but I wasn't anywhere near tall enough to shield her.

I glared at the boys. "What are you looking at?"

I could have been a bump in the road as much as they noticed me. Their stony gazes were fixed on Mom.

I tried to take her hands, but they were balled stiff and tight as tree roots. "Mom?"

Her eyes darted around, lighting on nothing in particular. She was trembling, and she wouldn't look up. Finally I uncurled her hand and led her away, as Dad had done.

That was the last time she left the house.

Once, a few years later, Aunt Bliss persuaded her to step beyond our kitchen door. I stood nearby, offering encouragement. When Mom reached a patch of grass, she couldn't go backward and she couldn't travel forward. She trembled all over, showing the whites of her moss-green eyes like a spooked horse. Her breath came in quick gasps. We both grabbed her slender wrists and tried to pull her forward. We might have been tugging on a marble statue. Eventually Aunt Bliss guided her back inside.

I still feel ashamed when I think of that day.

Afterward I just accepted my mother as she was. Given the choice, I would rather have had her stay in the house. I couldn't bear to see her fear-struck.

Dad didn't give up his travel dreams right away. He brought out the wish box every Sunday morning, as usual—until the autumn I turned ten. We had just finished the drive-in season, and he was closing the place for winter. It was twilight, and I remember him walking across the field toward the concessions building, the cardboard box under his right arm. There was something in the droop of his shoulders that made me think things weren't quite right. I watched him disappear into the building and guessed where he was going.

He sat in the projection booth for more than an hour, intent on something I couldn't see. After several minutes he thrust his cupped hand out the open window, held it there for a moment, then turned it over. Bits of paper, visible in the square of window light, fluttered to the ground like candy-colored confetti.

I don't know what time he returned home that night. I had already gone back to the house before him, and I was asleep when he came in. But I woke before anyone else the next morning and tramped out to the drive-in field. The air was crisp and cold and the newly risen sun so bright it hurt my eyes. I knelt on the frosty

ground directly under the projection window and picked up every scrap of paper that was larger than the head of a nail. I dropped the blue shreds of western skies and green fragments of palm trees into a shoe box, then carried that box back to my bedroom and hid it in a corner of my closet. Don't ask me why.

Chapter Four

WO days after Memphis had sampled Mom's sweet-potato pie, he turned up on our living-room doorstep. It was early evening, and cars were just starting to file into the parking lot. Dad had already stationed himself in the projection booth, and I was taking advantage of his absence by tuning in rock 'n' roll music on the radio. Dad called rock 'n' roll a communist conspiracy.

Mom was sitting in an easy chair darning Dad's white socks, and I was tapping my foot to the beat of the song, when Memphis knocked lightly on the screen-door frame and said, "Hello."

We both jumped in surprise. Mom stuffed the sock, needle and all, between the chair arm and cushion and hurried to the screen door.

With a smile that made me catch my breath, he handed her a gallon coffee can filled to the brim with strawberries.

Her eyes lit up. "Why, Charlie Memphis, what is this?"

"I happened to be walking past a farmer's field, and he asked if I wanted to pick some. Right away, I thought of you."

I didn't know any farmer who'd give away fruit, and I might have searched his face for evidence of a white lie if I hadn't been staring at the berries. A good number of them were green.

Mom didn't seem to notice. "I could make us a shortcake if you'd want to stay awhile."

"I wouldn't hear of you baking on a hot night like this." He took a step back off the porch. "I'll just be running along."

"No, please, come in." She wore that same fearful look she got whenever Aunt Bliss stood up to leave. "Please," she added softly.

I noticed Memphis was wearing a clean blue denim shirt with a collar that was slightly frayed and his beat-up gray Stetson. He'd shaved recently, and he smelled like fresh-cut grass.

"Well, I guess I could stay a minute," he said, stepping into the living room. He caught sight of me. "Hey there, pardner."

"Hi, Memphis."

Mom carried the coffee can into the kitchen, flipping on the light as she went. The yellow canary shot out of our cuckoo clock and squawked the quarter hour. Mom nodded at one of the chairs. "Now you sit right down, Charlie Memphis."

Memphis lowered himself onto the seat and fished a Lucky Strike from his shirt pocket. He stuck the cigarette in his mouth and touched his lighter's blue flame to the tip. He drew the smoke in deeply and blew out a long gray ribbon. "Sure has been a hot one, hasn't it?"

"Sure has," Mom said as cheerfully as if he'd just declared there'd be two Christmases this year. She lifted out a handful of berries and held them in midair, staring at them. I guess she wondered the same thing I did. Why would anybody pick them green?

As though reading her mind, Memphis jerked his thumb toward the bucket. "You're going to have to sort those out," he said. "I imagine there's some there that ain't ripe."

She looked at him in surprise. "You can't see if they are or not?"

He shook his head. "I'm color-blind. Red and green look about the same to me."

Mom rinsed the berries in water and gently lowered them into a bowl. She gave him the sweetest smile. "They're beautiful, Charlie Memphis. Just exactly the right color."

I scooted closer so I could peer into his eyes. I figured they'd look different, like the glass eye Mr. Gibbons, the pharmacist, wore. His left one always seemed to be staring at you even when

the right one was checking out the lady at the magazine rack. Except for having that gray-brown effect that made you wonder what color they really were, Memphis's eyes looked all right to me. I was disappointed.

"How do you know what to do when you come to a stoplight?" I asked him.

He smiled. "Red's always on top."

I made a face. "Yeah, I didn't think of that." I peppered him with half a dozen more questions until Mom made me stop. Soon we were sitting at the table eating fresh strawberries dipped in powdered sugar, and he was telling us about the time he painted somebody's kitchen orange when it was supposed to be sunshine yellow. The owner of the house, a rich, fussy lady, nearly passed out. The store had mixed up the paint cans.

Then he told us a longer story about a fortune-teller that he and his friend Earl had met in a small town in Oregon. Seems the old woman told Earl he was in danger and needed to beware, and she told Memphis that he was going to come into some money, which he should spend wisely. If he didn't, his luck would disappear for many years after.

I scooted closer to the table. "Did the fortune come true?"

Memphis popped a sugar-dusted strawberry into his mouth. "You're getting ahead of the story, but as a matter of fact, it did. That afternoon we tromped along a good-sized river called the Willamette. I happened to look down, and what should I see staring back at me but a fifty-dollar bill."

"Honest?"

"Honest. There it was, just as the old lady had said. Earl and I got ourselves haircuts and bought the biggest dinners we'd eaten in weeks."

Mom just smiled, not saying a word. Already my skin was beginning to prickle. I was afraid to hear what happened to Earl, but I had to know.

"Did he die?" I asked.

Memphis smiled. "Who, Earl? Nah, nothing quite that bad. That

night he drank more than he should have and fell off a roof. I had to spend the rest of the money getting him patched up."

I sighed in relief. Then something occurred to me. "What was he doing on the roof?"

Memphis glanced at my mom. "Well now, I can't really recall, but he shouldn't a been there."

She lowered her gaze. After a moment she stood, picked up the bowls and carried them to the sink. It occurred to me that Mom was wearing her hair a bit different. She had gathered it up at the back and fastened it with the mother-of-pearl comb I had given her for her birthday. A few wayward strands fell damply across her neck, which was pale as milk.

Memphis rose and stretched until his bones cracked. "Guess I better be moving along."

I jumped up. "It's still early. The first feature isn't even over."

Memphis glanced out the window, then at Mom. She didn't say anything.

"Got to get up at dawn, pardner, and work on that building before I can fry an egg on it."

Mom stepped beside me and put her arm around my shoulders. I could feel her cool hand through my thin blouse. "Thank you for the berries, Charlie Memphis," she said. "There's still some left, and I know Claude Junior will enjoy them in the morning."

"My pleasure, ma'am."

Outside, evening had deepened into night. The cicadas carried on as if they were forming their own buzz-saw band, and beyond the kitchen window the movie flickered on the distant screen. Wordlessly we all three watched it for a minute. Then Memphis started for the door, with Mom and me behind him.

I was still thinking about Earl. "How did you know you were spending the money the way you were supposed to?"

"Often wondered that." He turned but looked at my mom, not me. "Didn't have much luck, though, until I came here."

Mom didn't say anything. She kept her eyes down, her arm still looped around me, her hand absentmindedly stroking my shoulder.

Memphis stood there so long I began to wonder if he was really going to leave.

He fingered the brim of his Stetson. "Always good seeing you, Teal."

He turned her name into two syllables that rolled smoothly off his tongue. Dad always pronounced it as one sharp word, and I think she noticed the difference. She looked up and smiled.

Finally he put on his hat and strode out.

I DON'T think Dad had any idea that Memphis was stopping by our house most nights after the movie started, and Mom never said a word about it. Anyone could see my father and Memphis didn't have much use for each other. They rarely spoke, except to discuss what needed fixing next.

As soon as he finished painting the concessions building, Memphis began excavating the area around the septic tank. The steaming mountain of dirt he loaded into my father's three-quarter-ton blue pickup smelled worse than the skunk that had crawled under Aunt Bliss's house and died. You couldn't have paid me enough to dig around in that stuff, but for some reason Memphis didn't seem to mind the stink. He said a person gets used to it.

After he hauled away the clogged soil, he constructed yellow-painted wooden barriers around the cavity so kids wouldn't stumble into it. But something happened one night that was a lot more exciting than a kid falling into a hole.

It was Saturday, and people were packing the drive-in to see *Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy.* I left the playground area, having already tired of watching pajama-clad kids tumble off the monkey bars and run to their parents crying. People said I was lucky to have a jungle gym, seesaw and swings in my front yard, but when you're playing on them alone in the middle of the day, they get pretty boring. I was more interested in the high school boy manning the box office.

I flipped back my hair the way I'd seen Lauren Bacall do it. "Hello, Virgil."

"Hi, Callie Anne. Sure is busy tonight."

The box office rested on a concrete pad that was about four feet square. I dropped to the ground near Virgil's feet and leaned my back against the door, which had been propped open to let in air. Staring up at him, I could see on his jaw the thin white scar he got falling off his uncle's palomino. As if his interest in horses and his bravery weren't enough, Virgil possessed two more fine qualities. He was smarter than the other boys I knew, and when he had the time, he was willing to talk with me. Cars crept by, one by one, and their drivers handed over the admission price. The next vehicle, its muffler rumbling like someone's overwrought stomach, pulled alongside the box-office window.

Suddenly Virgil stiffened. Without looking down, he spread a warning hand for me to stay put and eased the cash drawer shut with his other hand.

I heard a man growl, "Hey, kid. See this."

Virgil nodded.

"If'n you don't put all the money you got into this here sack, I'm gonna blow your head off." His words were thick and slurred, and I felt my insides go all cold. I poked my head up just enough to see a short-barreled gun pointed unsteadily in Virgil's direction.

Virgil peered inside the sack, then wet his lips nervously. "It's got a doughnut in it."

"Huh?"

"There's a chocolate doughnut in it. Looks pretty sticky. You want me just to dump the money on top?"

A hand reached out and yanked the bag back. "Leroy, you idiot, what the hell's that doing in there?"

Another boozy voice whined something I couldn't make out. Virgil made a slicing gesture with his right hand that clearly told me to take off. As I crept away on legs that had gone soft as bread dough, I heard Virgil say, "Gosh, fellas, the cash drawer's stuck."

I stayed close to the board fence, glancing once over my shoulder at the two men inside the old maroon Studebaker that shook and shimmied under the bright entrance lights. When I reached the

open field, I straightened and ran as fast and hard as I could. I smacked directly into Memphis, who was leaving the concessions building.

"Robbers," I gasped. "They're gonna shoot Virgil and—"

He bolted before I even finished the sentence. I couldn't keep up with his long stride, but he stopped at the corner of the fence, where I caught up with him.

"That it?" He nodded at a gray Plymouth next to the box office.

I shook my head and wheezed, "Guess they're gone."

He walked cautiously toward the cubicle, with me at his heels.

Virgil was collecting money from people and adding it to neatly stacked coins and dollar bills on the counter. His brown freckles stood out like a stampede of bugs across his chalky face.

Memphis slid in beside him. "They get the cash in the drawer?"

"Not yet," Virgil said. "They're back in line."

Memphis stared at him. "What?"

"Well, I told them the drawer was stuck. People were yelling and blowing their horns, so I suggested they go to the end of the line. I said by the time they'd get back here, I'd have it open."

Memphis laughed. "And they bought it?"

Virgil shrugged. "Just dumb and drunk enough to. They're in that rattletrap Studebaker."

Memphis took off running toward the Studebaker.

I paused long enough to say, "I'm glad you're not shot, Virgil."

He gave me a weak smile and nodded.

As I reached the car, Memphis was yanking the door open. He jerked the driver from his seat. The robber threw the first punch. I saw a glint of reflected light. Memphis's fist shot out and hit the bandit's wrist with a loud thwack. A pistol squirted into the air like a wet bar of soap and landed near my feet.

I snagged the gun and backed up. Memphis might need my help. I positioned my finger on the pistol trigger, aiming downward.

The other robber tumbled out of the car and staggered toward Memphis. He tried to hammer him on the back of the neck, but his fist couldn't dent those hard, tight muscles. Memphis reached be-

hind and swatted at the balled hand like it might have been a horsefly, then swung around and with a few good blows smashed the man to the ground.

The driver seemed to sober up quick. He bared his crooked brown teeth and charged Memphis with an outstretched fist, trying to sock him below the belt. I had seen enough movie fights to know that wasn't fair. I could tell Memphis felt the same way, because his eyes went all dark and narrowed to slits a dime couldn't have passed through. Somehow he got hold of the guy's shirt and twisted it close to his neck. For a few seconds they spun around together, their boots grinding against the gravel and stirring up a cloud of dust. Then Memphis punched and punched, opening a cut above the robber's left eyebrow. Blood gushed and streamed down his face.

The man was clearly beaten, and I waited for Memphis to release him, to let him fall to the ground. But Memphis just kept on, holding him up and jabbing at him until the robber hung limp in his hands. Red foam rose to his lips and dribbled down his chin. It was unlike anything I'd ever seen in the movies, and I felt my insides twist.

"Memphis," I yelled. "Memphis, stop!"

He slugged the bandit once more, square in the face, and I heard a dull sound like glass crunching. I flinched.

A boom like a cherry bomb going off blasted near my feet. Dirt and gravel chips spit into the air. When I felt the throb of the recoil in my arm, I realized I had squeezed the pistol trigger.

I heard a thud as the robber dropped to the ground like a bag of dirty laundry, and I nearly passed out right then. I realized to my great horror I must have shot him. The smell of gun smoke hung in the air. Sweat was pouring down Memphis's face, trickling through streaks of blood and grime. He was staring at the robber as if he didn't quite know where he'd come from, as if some fellow with bloodier hands than his own might have pounded the living daylights out of him.

Memphis turned his gaze on me, and I saw him wince. "Callie Anne."

"Yeah?"

He measured out each word in a strangely controlled tone. "Callie Anne, very slowly now, I want you to give me that gun."

I looked down at my hand. I was about three feet from him, aiming the pistol directly at his midsection.

"Oh." I dropped it as if I'd been stung, and Memphis snatched it up.

The robber, who I thought was dead, groaned and tried to sit up. He fell right over again. I hadn't shot him after all, but he looked like someone had taken a hammer to his face. A flap of dark, meaty flesh dangled from the end of his left eyebrow, and his lids were almost puffed shut.

About that time my father showed up, red-faced and full of questions. Other men who had streamed out of their cars were all talking at once. Several loudly insisted that if they had known those fellas were holding up the theater, they'd have rushed in to help. No one said anything about me shooting the gun, and if anyone cared about the beating, they didn't mention it. Instead, they made a big deal out of locating rope and tying up the robbers, who were in such bad shape they couldn't have escaped anyway. Three county sheriff's cars barreled in, red lights flashing, sirens screaming and tires spewing up gravel. Dad stopped the film so people could watch Sheriff Ralph Jankowski and his deputies haul the robbers off to jail. I walked back to the house, realizing Mom must be wondering what all the commotion was about. When I got inside, she grabbed me. "What's happened? Are you hurt?"

I squirmed away. "I'm okay, but we had a robbery. Memphis caught the bandits and saved the money."

She went white as chalk. "Where's your father?"

"Back in the projection room, I guess. He's okay."

"And Charlie Memphis? Is he hurt?"

"Not much. The other guys looked a lot worse."

It took me a half hour to describe the night's events. Of course, I had enough sense to leave out my part with the gun. By the time I'd finished, it was clear to me that Memphis had saved the drive-in, no

two ways about it, just as good as John Wayne or Gary Cooper could have done it.

I sighed. "It was exciting, Mom. I bet Memphis'll stop by and tell you the whole story himself."

She turned, pulled me to her and laid her cool cheek on my forehead. My thoughts strayed. I began to think of Memphis rescuing me, just me alone, from the hooded bandits. He galloped in on a barrel-chested white stallion and scooped me up in his powerful arms. I pressed my head against his warm, sturdy chest and held on tight. Behind him, on a smaller, less impressive horse, trailed his faithful sidekick Virgil, who desperately and silently loved me, but who would never betray his friend. It was a magnificent scene as we all three rode into the sunset.

IT WAS a full twenty-four hours after the robbery before Memphis turned up on our doorstep. He was carrying three cold bottles of orange soda pop, which was almost as good as Grape Nehi. From what I could tell, his split lip and bruised knuckles were healing fine, but Mom brought out the iodine anyway. She applied it as gently as if she were tending me, crisscrossing his skin with bright orange slashes.

Her voice was so light it seemed to float. "Now sit still, Charlie Memphis, and behave yourself."

I thought he'd mind her fussing over him like that, but he acted as though he enjoyed it.

"Memphis?" I said.

"Hmm?"

"Aren't you going to tell Mom about last night?"

He set his bottle of soda down on the table with a clunk and leaned back in his chair. "Well, shortstuff, I figured you'd already done that."

"Not like you could."

"Callie Anne says you're a hero, Charlie Memphis."

With an odd, lopsided smile he rose slowly from the chair and walked over for the ashtray sitting on the windowsill above the sink.

He returned to the table, and I propped my elbows on the Formica, ready to listen. I knew we'd hear a real wingding now. He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, the blue flame curling toward him as he drew in a breath. He gave my mother a long, thoughtful look, then turned to me. "There were no heroes last night."

He didn't say any more. I scrunched down in the chair, feeling he had made a liar out of me. I had heard there was almost three hundred dollars in the cash drawer. Everyone else thought that was important. Even Mom seemed disappointed.

When Memphis stood to leave, I went out with him. No more than thirty feet from the house, I blurted, "Why wouldn't you tell her about the robbery? You're always telling stories. Why not that one?"

He waved a hand. "See up there?"

I stared at the screen. "The movie?"

"Entertainment, just like the stories. What happened last night was real, shortstuff. People ain't the heroes you think they are. You better learn that while you're young."

"But you saved the drive-in."

"Me and Virgil. Remember Virgil?" Memphis gripped my shoulder hard. "There weren't nothing good about last night, and I ain't a hero. You got that, kid?" He released me and walked off.

I remained where I was, slightly stunned.

EVEN if Memphis didn't believe they were heroes, everyone else did. A gum-chomping reporter from the Jessup *Enterprise* came to the drive-in on Monday and scribbled page after page in his notebook. Memphis didn't want his picture taken, so the fellow photographed my dad and Virgil shaking hands outside the box office.

After it was over, Virgil headed toward his truck and I fell into step with him. "Gosh, won't people be surprised when they see your picture in the paper? Course, most people have probably heard about it. I mean, everybody says it's the biggest thing since—" When it occurred to me my words were banging together like boxcars in a train wreck, my face grew hot. I said more quietly, "What you did was brave, Virgil."

"I didn't decide to be brave," he said. "I didn't think about how it might turn out." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans, which were so new and stiff they didn't appear to bend at the knees. Some farm kids wore shabby clothes and never scrubbed their fingernails, but not Virgil. Even when he wasn't getting his picture taken, he had what my dad called a clean-cut look.

I gazed up at him. "You were still smart to trick those bandits like you did. They could have shot you."

He nodded. "Memphis said he got in a fight like that once and a man got killed."

I swung around. "You mean Memphis killed somebody?"

Virgil shrugged. "I don't know. He just said someone got killed."

The idea of a shoot-out sent a thrill through me. I could see the outlaw strutting down the street, Memphis facing him, cool and fearless, pulling his pistol a split second before the other guy drew his.

Virgil started walking again, and I skipped beside him, trying to match his long stride. "How did it happen?"

"He didn't say. I think he just wanted me to know it doesn't always end so well."

We reached the flatbed Ford truck that belonged to Virgil's dad. Virgil was only fifteen, but being a farm kid, he was allowed to drive it around the countryside without the sheriff stopping him. He swung himself into the driver's seat, just as I remembered I had intended to ask him a favor.

I dug deep into my shorts pocket and pulled out a handful of change. "I was hoping you might buy something for me the next time you go into Jessup."

I told him what it was, and he listened thoughtfully. "You sure your dad's not going to mind?"

"No, absolutely not. You don't have to worry."

He dropped the money into his shirt pocket. "All right, then." He pushed the truck's starter button until it caught, and shifted the Ford into gear. It lumbered down the road like an old black bear.

ON WEDNESDAY THE STORY came out in the Jessup *Enterprise*. It had a good picture of Dad. Mom had pressed his theater manager's shirt to a white stiffness, and he'd slicked down the cowlicks in his brown hair. With his square jaw and the military-straight posture he'd managed to keep in spite of his bad leg, he looked solidly in charge. Virgil put me in mind of Jimmy Stewart, kind of long-boned and embarrassed to be there. If you examined the photograph closely, you could see Memphis standing in the shadows.

That night I ambled over to the snack bar. The humid June air was heavy and motionless, and the aromas of fresh popcorn and hot butter hung like a cloud over the concessions building. Two teenage girls on duty talked and giggled. One was a brunette, the other a glossy blonde. They glanced at me but didn't stop chattering.

Just beyond the point where the L-shaped snack bar bent, Virgil stood up, balancing a stack of paper cups in his hand.

The dark-haired girl squealed, "You're just awful, Virgil, hiding behind there like that. Did you hear what we were saying?"

Virgil blinked and set the cups down. "I wasn't hiding."

She flicked her hair to the side, her hand fluttering across it like a bird's wing. "Oh, Virgil," she breathed.

I eased toward him and tried out the movie-star smile I'd been working on. "Hello, Virgil."

He smiled back. "Hey, Callie Anne."

He moved toward me, his big rawboned hand skimming the top of the counter. The dark-haired girl glanced at me, then turned to her friend and whispered something. They both laughed.

I lowered my voice. "I don't suppose you had a chance to—"

"Yup. Got it right here." He opened a cabinet drawer, pulled out a thin package wrapped in brown paper and handed it to me. Its contents had taken all of my savings.

"Gee, thanks. Thanks a lot." I gave him a dopey grin.

MY FATHER ate his meals at the same time every day. He went to bed and rose at the same time, and on Monday and Thursday mornings he drove into Jessup to the Empire Theater Organization

office. I should have waited until Dad was safely away from the drive-in before I opened the package, but that would have meant missing the trip into town with him and Memphis. I thought of riding next to Memphis in the truck and trailing along behind him to the hardware store. Then I thought of the package again, and it seemed to me that if I was careful, I could have it all.

Dad usually spent a half hour going through the weekend receipts before he left for town. I waited until he tramped stiffly off to the concessions building; then I softly closed my bedroom door and shut the window. I retrieved the flat parcel from my bureau, slipped the 45 rpm from its paper cover and positioned it on the turntable of my portable record player.

I'd first heard "Rock Around the Clock" when we'd played *The Blackboard Jungle* at the drive-in. It was a movie Dad hated. He said it was the kind of trashy picture that gave teenagers evil ideas. All I remembered from the movie was that music.

I was bouncing around my pink-walled bedroom, dying for someone else to hear it. It occurred to me that Mom might have seen bits and pieces of the movie from our window, but she'd never heard the sound.

I unplugged the record player and carried it into the kitchen. "Mom, you have to listen to this."

Bill Haley and His Comets blared from the tinny speaker, a sound that was both primitive and musical. Immediately caught up in the beat, I hopped around the kitchen, wiggling my butt the way I'd seen the teenagers do. Mom tapped her fingers in time on the table's speckled Formica. "Catchy, isn't it?" she said.

My back was to the door when Dad walked in. I saw Mom's shocked look at the same time the needle screeched across the record. Dad held the record up and pressed his thumbs to it. The snap was dreadful, almost deafening. I screamed, then crumpled to the floor and sobbed like a five-year-old.

I heard Mom say, "Claude Junior, what have you done?"

Looking up through my tears, I saw Dad shaking one half of the record at her. "Do you have any idea what this is, Teal?"

I'm not sure what possessed me or where I found the courage, but I whispered, "I'll buy another one."

There was a moment of absolute stillness.

In one quick motion he grabbed the record player and gave it an upward jerk. The short black cord popped from the electrical socket, and the plug caught me on the cheek. I heard only one sound, my cry of pain, but there must have been a second, the tremendous crash as the record player hit the floor. I fell to my knees alongside it.

An instant later Mom was on the linoleum beside me, pulling me to her. "No, Claude Junior. No!" I touched my numb cheek, expecting to find blood, but the plug hadn't broken the skin.

Mom and I were still cowering on the floor when Memphis appeared at the screen door. Without an invitation he stepped inside. His face turned dark red. Judging by his clenched hands and cold-eyed silence, he was going to do something that would only make things worse.

Mom must have realized it too. Clutching the edge of the table, she jumped up and with a deliberately casual gesture smoothed her skirt. "Gosh, that sure made a racket. I . . . I tripped."

Memphis didn't answer. He was staring at my face. Then he shifted his gaze to Dad before looking at Mom. It was clear he wanted only a signal from her. Her eyes were large and round with apprehension. She didn't move or speak, but her wordless plea hung in the air. After a long moment he dropped his hands to his sides.

I hadn't moved the whole time.

Memphis stepped over and helped me up. "You okay?"

I nodded, although I was still trembling.

It was several seconds before Mom or Dad moved. Then, in the way grown-ups have of pretending nothing is out of the ordinary, Mom picked up the record player, set it on the table and pushed the chairs back to their usual order.

A FEW mornings later, soon after the sun rose, I tugged on my clothes and fixed myself a breakfast of shredded wheat and milk. Misty sunlight spilled over the treetops, and somewhere in the dis-

tance a rooster crowed. It seemed to me God could do away with the middle of the day. The best parts came around sunrise and sunset, when even the flowers smelled the strongest.

If I'd left our house at any other moment, I would have missed seeing Memphis. Later I thought about how amazing it was that two people or two cars or two railroad trains could hit the same spot at the same time without some planning ahead, and how different people's lives might be if their timing were just a minute or so off. Ours certainly would have changed that morning.

As it turned out, I was approaching the concessions building when the rear door swung open. Memphis stepped out and sucked in a deep breath as if he couldn't get enough fresh air. I noticed he was carrying his duffel bag.

It took me a few moments to grasp what was happening. When I did, I shouted, "Hey, where're you going?"

He stopped and his back stiffened, but he didn't look back at me.

We passed the box office and the theater sign and came to the road. He still hadn't spoken. He stepped onto the pavement, and when we heard the muffled rumble of a concrete truck as it rounded the bend, he stuck out his thumb. It lumbered by, and he started hiking along the shoulder.

After two cars and a truck loaded with crated white chickens rolled past us, he yelled, "Go home, shortstuff. Nobody's going to stop for me if you stick around."

"You weren't even going to say good-bye, were you? How could you leave without saying good-bye?" I didn't like my voice, the way it sounded high and strained.

It took another minute or so, but he finally turned and set the bag at his feet. "I can't stay."

"Why not?"

"Because if I hang around here, there's going to be trouble."

My mouth dropped open. He wasn't behaving the way he was supposed to. What had happened to the man who had saved our drive-in from bandits?

He hoisted his bag and took off again. I followed him, keeping

about twenty feet between us. I couldn't bear the thought of his walking out of my life. No one else in Jessup, maybe the whole state, was anywhere near as handsome or exciting, and I was certain I'd never love another man as much.

I heard two loud toots from a horn behind me. A big pickup loaded with empty wooden crates clattered by. It pulled alongside Memphis and shuddered to a stop. The driver motioned Memphis to get in the passenger side. As he hoisted his bag and moved toward the cab, his gaze caught mine.

I barely raised my voice. "What about my mother? I'll bet you didn't even tell her you were leaving, did you?" He didn't move. "She hasn't got many friends, you know, stuck in the house the way she is. She said she really appreciated the way you been nice to her." She hadn't said that, but I was reaching for what I could. "I guess that doesn't matter to you, though, does it?"

I heard the driver yell, "Hey, fella, you coming or not?"

"Yeah, I'm coming." Without another glance at me, Memphis hopped into the pickup, and it rattled down the road.

I turned back toward the drive-in. "Go on if you want to," I muttered under my breath. "See if I care." I could feel tears pooling in my eyes and sliding onto my cheeks.

I heard the squeal of brakes and figured the truck must have hit an animal in the road. I spun around. The truck had jerked to a stop all right, but I couldn't see or hear anything it might have struck.

Memphis climbed out. He barely had time to grab his bag before the driver ground the gears, accelerated in a cloud of dust and clacked lickety-split down the highway.

The way Memphis strode by me, I might have been a Burma Shave sign along the road. When I saw him next, he was painting a bench in front of the concessions building.

I EXPECTED things to return to the way they had been, with Memphis digging holes and painting buildings and looking more scruffy as time went along, but that's not what happened. The next morning, his day off, Memphis hitched a ride into town and returned with

several cardboard clothes boxes from Miller's Department Store.

That evening Mom was cutting out a dress pattern on the kitchen table when she caught a glimpse of Memphis at the screen door. "Why, Charlie Memphis." She walked over and opened the door, then said the same thing all over again.

I had to look twice to make sure it was him. He removed an expensive-looking black cowboy hat from his head and plopped it on a chair. His creased black slacks and his stiff white shirt crackled like the pages in a new book. But what I liked best was his belt buckle. Stamped into the metal was the outline of a grizzly—massive head raised, fangs bared. It was just the sort of buckle a real cowboy would wear. He'd polished his boots until they gleamed, and he'd had a trim and a shave. To top it off, he smelled like one of those men who come from Indianapolis looking for property to buy. I tried not to let my jaw drop down in surprise.

We went through a few awkward moments of everybody trying to figure out what to say. Mom hurried around, setting out chocolate cake and coffee. Then Memphis sort of took over and told us a story he'd heard at the barbershop about a local man whose big toe got bit off by a catfish. I said that didn't make any sense at all, because I'd been swimming in Clear Lake where there were truckloads of catfish, but I'd never seen any with teeth big enough to chomp off a man's toe. Memphis said that was the point, wasn't it? This wasn't just any fish. So things were back to normal, except that something other than clothes was different about Memphis, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Mom and I were sitting at the table with our backs to the door and Memphis was on the chrome-framed kitchen chair across from us when he leaned over and said in a low voice, "I don't mean to scare you, but there's someone on your porch with his face pressed against the screen."

If I hadn't seen Billy at least once every few weeks for the past several years, he would have given me the heebie-jeebies.

"Oh, it's all right," Mom said, rising from her chair and walking to the door. "Hello, Billy, how are you tonight?"

He pulled back, offering her a shy smile. "Hi, Teal." He snuffled a little and rubbed his nose on the sleeve of his ragged shirt. "I was wondering if you could come out?"

"Not tonight," Mom said softly. "I'm a little busy right now, but you wait right here while I get you a piece of chocolate cake."

She wrapped a good-sized piece in waxed paper, stuck toothpicks into it to hold it together and handed it to him. "Now run along, Billy, but don't bother anyone."

I leaned toward Memphis and whispered, "He pokes his head inside people's cars and begs food off them. If you ever hear a scream come from the drive-in field during the movie, you can figure it's just Billy scaring the daylights out of someone."

Memphis nodded with a half smile. "I seen him around Jessup once or twice. Who is he?"

"His name's Billy Watson," I said. "He lives with his uncle, who has a farm about halfway between here and town, but a lot of the time he just wanders around."

"What happened to him?" Memphis asked, stirring sugar into his coffee. "He get kicked in the head by a horse?"

"He went off to the war when he graduated from high school," Mom said. "When he came back, he was like this." She stared at our empty plates as though remembering another time and place. "He was the sweetest, kindest boy in high school. And so smart. Why, we were all sure he'd go off to college and make something of himself."

"But Betty Jo Babcock's mom said he was quiet and kept to himself a lot." I'd heard the story so many times I knew everybody's version of it.

After a moment Mom's eyes glistened a little, and she looked away. "Oh, I suppose he was, but he didn't bother anybody. I don't know why people have to be so hard on a person for being quiet and shy."

It suddenly occurred to me the conversation was dredging up bad memories of her own troubles. Before I could think of what to say, Memphis jumped up and began carrying the cake plates to the sink.

"Goodness, you don't have to do that." Mom grabbed the dirty coffee cups and leaped up too.

Memphis set the dishes on the drainboard. But I guess he didn't realize she was right behind him, because he turned, knocking a cup from her hands and sending it sailing into the air. He caught it before it hit the floor, but the coffee in it streaked the front of his gleaming new white shirt.

Mom's eyes grew large as silver dollars. "Oh, no, Charlie Memphis. I'm so sorry."

He shrugged. "Don't worry about it, Teal."

"I can clean it," she said.

Maybe he thought she was going to unbutton his shirt right then and there, because he grabbed her hand. "Teal, you don't have to."

For a long moment she didn't do or say anything. Then she pulled free and backed up a few steps, pink circles dotting her cheeks. She lowered her gaze.

"It's not important," he said softly. "You don't have to wash it." He thanked her for the cake and left.

Stammering some excuse to Mom about being tired, I ducked into my room. I flopped onto my bed and picked up a Nancy Drew mystery, but I couldn't keep my mind on it. I thought about Memphis reaching for Mom's hand and watching her closely. I suspected that in some ways he liked my mother better than me, and I didn't care for the way that felt.

Chapter Five

THE more summer wore on, the more my love for Memphis grew. I dreamed of our future together. We would marry and travel to those exciting western cities he talked about—San Francisco, Boise, Seattle. I saw them in my head, like bright picture postcards, like the slick brochures Dad used to collect. Memphis and I would be such a striking

couple, people in those big towns would nudge each other as we walked by. "Look at him, so tall and good-looking," they would whisper, "and her, so pretty and so poised for someone that young."

Someday he'd take me to visit his parents. His mother and I would become immediate friends. I saw us in the living room of her large, impressive home, sitting on a wide, flowered sofa, gazing out over their sprawling lawns and drinking coffee from gold-rimmed china cups. She would fold her hand over mine and give it a squeeze. "Bless you, my dear. I can see you've made him so happy."

I wanted to tell Memphis I loved him, but I couldn't get up my courage. I was afraid he might say he didn't love me back. Or worse yet, he'd say I was too young.

Betty Jo Babcock once told me that when adults talked about love, they really meant sex. We were in fifth grade at the time, and the only reliable thing I knew about sex was that the word shouldn't be said out loud.

Betty Jo told me her seventeen-year-old sister Mary Alice did "it" with boys. It took me some time to figure out exactly what "it" was, and when I did, I was horrified. "No," I said.

"Uh-huh." Betty Jo nodded with the confident air of being one up on me and loudly smacked her pink bubble gum.

In my mind I conjured up the body parts and goings-on she'd described. "But why would they do that?"

She rolled her eyes upward, imploring heaven for patience. "So they can have a baby. Mary Alice says if she gets pregnant, then Mom will have to let her marry Duane. She hates Mom and would rather live with Duane."

"How many times does she have to do it to get a baby?"

Betty Jo shrugged, her shoulders grazing the ends of her Toni-permed brown hair. "I don't know. As many times as Duane wants to, I guess. Mary Alice says it doesn't hurt."

I wanted to ask her more, but the bell clanged and recess was over.

Although I didn't especially trust Betty Jo, much of what she said made sense. It gave me an idea of what was going on in my parents' bedroom every Tuesday night when they closed the door and I

heard those muffled noises and creaking bedsprings. I couldn't avoid the horrifying conclusion that in spite of their age, they were trying to make a baby.

It also explained why Aunt Bliss didn't have kids. There was no way she would let my uncle do something like that to her.

WHENEVER I wanted to learn about a subject that wasn't in *The Saturday Evening Post* or *Reader's Digest,* I visited the Jessup Public Library. So it seemed the natural place to turn when I wanted to find out about love. I knew I wasn't going to find what I was looking for in the children's section, but the adult area upstairs was off-limits to kids under thirteen without a parent's permission.

I wangled Mom's approval, and on my next visit to town I scaled the polished wooden stairs, clutching my passport to the new world. I entered the adult library through the double-wide oak doors and gazed with awe toward the high ceiling, then down row after row of books. The massive room smelled of floor wax and musty paper.

I was unprepared for the silence in that cavernous vault. Not even the drive-in at two a.m. was that quiet. The hawk-nosed librarian inclined her head in recognition. I nodded back. Her kind gesture gave me the confidence to continue my mission. I set my shoulders and marched across the floor.

The engraved gold nameplate on the heavy oak desk said MISS IRIS MONHAUT, LIBRARIAN. In spite of the heat, Miss Monhaut wore a lightweight gray sweater draped over her shoulders and fastened at the neck by a pearl clasp. She studied me over black-framed reading glasses that were anchored to a silver chain around her neck, and her pencil was secured to the counter by heavy twine and cellophane tape. I began to suspect that Miss Monhaut liked to have things tied down.

I set the form with Mom's signature on the high counter in front of her and squeaked, "I have permission."

She examined it as though she thought I might have forged my mother's name. "You're the girl from the drive-in, aren't you?"

I nodded.

Suddenly she smiled. "Let me know if you need any help."

Cruising the rows, I searched for titles that suggested some promise. Forty-five minutes later I slid two books in front of Miss Monhaut and waited, my breath suspended. She opened *Women in Love* but didn't mark the due date on it.

"Hold off on this one, honey." She laid it aside and reached for the next. She cheerfully stamped *Passion Among the Pines.*

I read the first six chapters that afternoon. What a disappointment. The story was about an artist who lived in the woods and devoted his life to painting pictures of trees. It wasn't about love at all.

On my next trip to Jessup I checked out *The Loved One,* which was written by some lady named Evelyn Waugh. With a title like that you'd expect it to be romantic, but it was more about funerals and caskets than it was about love. It seemed to me the title was deceptive, a word I learned from reading it.

A FEW days later I was strolling across the drive-in field in late afternoon, going no place in particular, when I spotted Billy. He was shuffling toward the theater entrance directly on a collision course with Dad and Memphis.

"Run, Billy," I urged under my breath. "Get out of here."

It was a ridiculous suggestion, of course. With those flap-tongued shoes he couldn't run anywhere.

I saw my father's head snap up and focus on Billy. The muscles in Dad's shoulders tightened, and he leaped forward the way a dog does when he spots a rabbit. He charged across the field and clamped his fingers onto Billy's scruffy shirt. "You moron," he bellowed. "How many times do I have to tell you to stay out of here?"

Memphis seized Dad's shoulder. "Leave him alone, Claude. He ain't hurtin' anybody." Billy pitched sideways, took a few steps to steady himself, then loped toward the drive-in entrance.

Red-faced and sweating, Dad swung around and shoved Memphis on the chest. "You stay out of it."

"Come on, Claude. We got better things to do than chase that poor soul out of this drive-in."

His soothing tone only seemed to make my father angrier. "That moron pokes his head in people's cars while they're watching the movie and scares the pants off their kids. Last night three people demanded their money back. You try to tell me how to run this theater, and I'll kick you out so fast your head'll spin."

Memphis shrugged. "From what I been told, Sooter does the hiring and firing around here." He turned to leave.

Dad sprang toward him, grabbed his arm from behind and tried to shove him around. "Don't walk away from me while I'm—"

Memphis snapped his arms upward with such quickness and force that my father toppled to the ground.

Dad sat down hard with a grunt. He leaned forward and growled, "You . . ."

Memphis's shadow fell across Dad, and he stared at him with an expression so cold it pricked my flesh with goose bumps. But he didn't go after him. Instead, he turned and strode toward the drive-in entrance. As my father rose to his feet and brushed himself off, his gaze caught mine. He looked away, but not before I saw the fear in his eyes. He was afraid of Memphis, and it went much deeper than whether one was going to be punching the other one around.

"He should mind his own business," Dad muttered.

I knew he was saying that for my benefit, telling me he had been just doing his job and Memphis was in the wrong. But I didn't like the way any of it made me feel.

The shouting had been loud enough for my mother to hear, even though she couldn't see the fight. She'd be worried. I was halfway to our house when I heard the squealing crunch of brakes, followed by the sound of excited voices. Memphis came charging toward the concessions building.

"What's wrong?" I yelled.

"Billy got hit," he shouted back. "I'm calling for an ambulance."

I ran as fast as I could toward the highway. Just over the fence a great black hunk of a car with pointy fins—a Cadillac, I think—sat in the road like a beached whale. Several feet away, Billy's gangling body lay stretched on the pavement, his blue-veined eyelids closed,

a bright red river pulsing from his forehead. The blood streaked down his temples and pooled on the asphalt. A fleshy, broad-shouldered man squatted beside him. I dropped to Billy's other side.

"D-did you see what happened?" the big man stuttered in a drawl that was thick as river mud. "He stepped right in front of the car."

I pressed the edge of my blouse to Billy's forehead, where to my great horror I could see the white bone shining through. "Don't you have a towel or something?"

He glanced toward the car, his face twisted in confusion. "No, I don't think so."

I stared at the short-sleeved white shirt he was wearing. It had pearly snap buttons and blue curlicue stitching above the pockets. Finally he looked down at it too.

"Please," I said. "All this blood's gushing out of him."

He nodded and peeled off the shirt. I mashed it against Billy's forehead. He stirred and moaned.

"He's alive. Did you see him move?"

The man pushed his hat back. "I think I just clipped him. He shot sideways, like he was tossed by a bull." He looked down at Billy, and one of his eyelids twitched nervously. "I sure hope he don't die."

Memphis came running up then with a green army blanket from his bed and a couple of frayed towels. Dad followed. Memphis laid Billy's head on a folded towel and covered him with the blanket.

About ten minutes later an ambulance led by a sheriff's car, sirens blaring, rolled to a stop in front of us. A deputy and two men wearing white coats lifted Billy onto a stretcher. Then the ambulance went blasting down the highway, with the man in his Cadillac close behind.

"Do you think Billy will be okay?" I asked as we walked back.

Memphis shrugged. "Can't tell."

"Maybe it'll knock some . . ." Dad started to say. Eyeing Memphis, he didn't finish the sentence.

THAT night the projector broke about three quarters of the way through the movie. When Dad couldn't fix it, he had to return the admission money to people.

"Come back tomorrow evening," he told them. "It'll be up and running then."

They slowly drove their cars out the exit, their headlights streaking across the high board fence. The teenagers cleaned the snack bar and left, the downstairs lights winking off one by one. As I wandered across the empty lot, I heard the far-off whistle of a train and shortly after that the soothing hoot of a barn owl. In the distance an animal crossed the field—a coyote maybe, sleek and ghostly. Now that people had left, he prowled his own playland, blending into the shadows at will. More than anything, I wanted to be like him.

From the corner of my eye I glimpsed a ruby-red flicker and realized it was the burning tip of a cigarette. I'd been looking so hard at the shadows that I hadn't seen or heard Memphis walk up.

"Thought you'd want news of Billy," he said. "He got banged on the head real hard, but the doc says he's going to be fine. They'll keep him in the hospital a few days just to make sure."

"That's good news," I said, and felt happiness. Billy would live after all.

WE HAD just finished playing *To Catch a Thief* and were beginning a run of *Bad Day at Black Rock.* Though the movies that summer were just about the best I'd seen, I was reading more than ever before. Miss Monhaut kept recommending books she called classics, but I hadn't given up my search for a good one about love. I discovered *Dreams and Desires,* about an English girl who traveled far from home to become a governess at a castle in the Swiss Alps. The owner of the castle, an English lord, was a melancholy man whose wife had died in a fire. He fled with his daughter to Switzerland to escape his wife's memory. The little girl managed to bring her father and the governess together after what I thought were some pretty obvious tricks. Anyway, he finally kissed the governess but swore he wouldn't do it again, because he didn't intend to take advantage of her.

I wondered if Memphis, if anyone, would ever take advantage of me. The book made it sound as though it were every girl's dream, only the English lord and the governess just didn't realize it. They

spent a lot of time trying to stay away from each other. Until chapter 182, when they crashed into each other's arms with the force of two meteorites colliding. I walked around unaware of anyone and anything else, my nose pressed to the pages.

About that time Mom decided I needed my eyes checked. She called for an appointment, then spoke to my dad about it after dinner. "Dr. Finn's nurse says she can come in on Friday afternoon," she told him.

"Well, get your sister to drive her in. It sounds like something a woman should do. And how much is this going to cost?" He turned to me. "Don't be thinking you're going to get some fancy, expensive glasses, missy."

I nodded unhappily and rose. I was just outside the screen door when I heard Dad say, "We don't have the money, Teal."

The following Friday my aunt drove me to the optometrist anyway. Dr. Finn peered at my eyes with a little red flashlight and settled his face so close to mine I could see the cavernous pores on his skin. To his surprise but not my own, I could barely make out the big E on the chart. I chose blue plastic frames with tiny silver flecks. Aunt Bliss said they looked real pretty, but I felt miserable and homely.

"I hate them. They make me look more stupid than ever."

"No, don't you go saying that." She clamped a hand on my shoulder. "And don't listen to anyone who tells you that, you hear?"

I nodded and tucked my head down, kind of digging into myself.

I WAS to hear almost those same words a few nights later as I stood in the dark outside our kitchen screen door. I'd been down by the creek reading *Love's Rainbow* when the sun gave out on me and I decided to return to my room. As I approached the back steps, I heard Mom speaking. I didn't just barge in the way I usually did. I guess there was something in her voice that made me stop, a softness and a joyfulness that I didn't recall ever hearing before.

She gave a small laugh. "They're just silly verses, of course."

I heard the scrape of a chair and the clink of silverware against glass.

"What do you do with them?"

"Oh, I send them in. They're always announcing contests on the radio. I'd love to win a car or something. Claude Junior says I'm stupid to think I'm ever going to—"

"Well, Claude Junior's wrong. You're not stupid. You're smart, and you're pretty. And don't let him tell you any different."

There was a stunned silence, the kind you hear after a firecracker goes off. I moved over to where I could see them through the screen. They were seated next to the table, their chairs facing each other and close together. They seemed locked in a stare. The way Mom's eyes glittered made me wonder if she was crying.

She turned and bent her head low. "I'm not like other women."

He folded his hand over hers on the tabletop. "I wouldn't want you to be."

"I can't go outside." Her voice was breathy, almost a whisper. "I'm afraid to."

"I know."

"But I don't know anyone else who's this way."

He seemed to consider her words for a moment, weighing something in his mind. "I do."

She tilted her face up, almost hopeful.

He drew in a deep breath and set his jaw as if he'd made some decision. "Maybe not exactly the same. You're scared of all that open space out there." He jerked his thumb toward the window.

She nodded.

He said, "Well, he don't like being trapped in a small place. He knows how you feel. Every time he gets shut in somewhere, he can't breathe and his heart thumps against his ribs till he's sure they're going to split."

"Yes. Yes, he does know. And he can't let himself get caught like that, can he?"

"Never."

"How did it happen? When did it start?"

Memphis dredged up another breath. "He was about ten when his brother and him got locked in a closet. It seemed like there was

no air. He clawed the door and screamed for hours. He probably would have scratched his fingers to bloody stumps—" He looked at my mother's horrified eyes and stopped.

"Who locked him in there?" she asked, and I could see her thoughts were only for him now.

"His ma. She run off. Took the baby and left him and his brother to stay with their pa. She abandoned them." He used "abandoned" as though it were a cussword.

"Why did she leave?"

"Their father gambled and stepped out on her."

Tears rushed to my mother's eyes. "It must have killed a part of her soul to leave them behind."

He glanced at her sharply. "How do you know?"

"I just do. I'm a mother."

"She never said so. She only said, 'Your pa'll be home soon.' If she loved them, she should have taken them with her."

"It's hard to be a woman alone with one child. It'd be almost impossible with three children. She loved them enough to leave them with their father, who could take better care of them."

His face hardened. "To him they were just mouths to feed."

"Did the boy ever see her again?"

"Once, years later, when he was about twenty. She was working in a beat-up diner. He wouldn't have even gone in if his brother hadn't talked him into it. He didn't recognize her."

"Did he speak to her?"

Memphis reached across the table for the ashtray. "Nah. He didn't care about her anymore."

Mom laid her hand gently on his arm. "I think he cared very much."

He shrugged. "She left him behind. It made him wonder if anybody ever did love him or ever would."

"I'd love him," my mother said. "If he were here in this room right now, I'd love him."

He stared at her for a moment. "You would?"

Her eyes shone bright and steady. "Yes, I would."

He touched his fingertips to her cheek. When she didn't pull away, he slipped his arm around her and drew her to him, cupping her head in his hand. Their first kiss was soft and tender, the kind I'd seen a hundred times on the big screen just beyond our house. Then he lifted her to her feet, his blue work shirt straining taut across his shoulders. He clamped his arms around her so tightly I was afraid he'd crack her bones. She didn't struggle, but instead laced her fingers across the back of his head and made a soft noise deep in her throat. She finally pulled away, her breath quick and shuddery.

That's when my thoughts came crashing in on me. Standing there in the overpoweringly sweet blossoms of our honeysuckle bush, I realized Memphis had no right to be touching my mother that way. Besides, he was supposed to fall in love with me, not her. And my mother? She had to be crazy to act like this.

They began kissing again, eagerly and fiercely, while I watched in numb horror, the ground no longer steady beneath my feet. I stumbled into the shadows beyond the kitchen, then crossed the yard to the far side of the house, feeling as though a great black cloud had suddenly wrapped itself around me. When I reached the comforting white glow of the movie screen, I picked up speed. I ran across the parking field, past the cars and the speaker poles, past the concessions building and the box office, toward the theater entrance. Virgil must have seen me and called out, because somewhere in my head I heard his voice, but I didn't stop.

I heard the wail of a nearby train, and the thought came to me that I could hop it and travel on it to the end of the line, until I arrived in one of those cities Memphis was always talking about. I would be going alone, not with him as I had once dreamed. Memphis didn't care about me. It was my mother he'd been after the whole time. The humiliation burned through me.

I'd tell Dad. Sure, that's what I'd do. He'd probably beat the tar out of Memphis, who'd have to leave the drive-in, of course. But then Memphis was a drifter. And Mom? Well, maybe Dad would beat the tar out of . . .

I had to think about this, about what would happen if Dad found

out about Memphis and Mom. Besides, I couldn't run away now, wearing no more than a short-sleeved blouse and a pair of shorts. I'd need a bedroll, some clothes, food and money. I could leave tomorrow or the day after that. Dragging my feet, I turned homeward.

WE DIDN'T shut bedroom doors in our house, except on Tuesday nights when Dad and Mom closed theirs and their bed made those groaning and creaking noises. But that following morning anyone coming into my room would have had to get past a barricade consisting of the door, my pink-cushioned vanity chair, a wooden toy box plastered with horse decals, and an enormous stack of books.

There was a hollow-sounding knock. "Honey, don't you want breakfast?"

"No." I pulled the pillow over my head.

"Sweetheart, are you all right in there?"

"I'm fine. Go away."

Silence. Then I heard her tap down the hall. I'd expected her to keep pestering me, and when she didn't, I felt worse than ever for some reason. I couldn't stay in my room all day. After a few hours of reading a book I couldn't concentrate on, I took apart the barricade and walked into the kitchen.

Mom was standing by the sink. Dad was nowhere in sight.

She looked at me steadily. "What's wrong?"

I boldly took three oatmeal cookies from the fat ceramic bear, knowing she wouldn't stop me. "Nothing." I bit a chunk out of one of the cookies, hunched my shoulders and hurried out the door.

Ignoring Memphis's friendly wave from across the field, I ran toward the creek. I built a castle with rocks from the creek bed. I trapped a few frogs, but they managed to slither from my cupped hands and hop away. Even so, there was something soothing about them, about their spongy flesh on my fingertips and the warm mud on my bare feet. I would have stayed there all day, but I knew if I didn't show up for dinner, my absence would set off an explosion and Dad would come looking for me. As it was, I moped at the table, putting him in the worst kind of mood.

He jabbed his fork at the meat. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Got a stomachache." I nudged the broccoli around my plate, hoping I could avoid having to eat it.

I could feel Dad tense up, annoyed at me for disturbing his dinner. He turned to Mom. "Well, can't you give her something?"

She nodded. "I will." She poked at her own stack of broccoli.

Dad shifted his gaze from her to me, then back again. "Jeez, Teal, she has a bellyache. Get her some Bromo Seltzer."

Mom jumped up and headed for the medicine cabinet.

Dad stood, wadded the napkin that Mom had cross-stitched with tiny blue flowers and threw it on the table. "Both of you picking at your food like a couple of dumb chickens," he said as he stomped out.

I slipped out the door before Mom came back. The last thing I needed was Bromo Seltzer. I'd lost my mother.

MEMPHIS no longer waved at me, but he still came to our house every evening, and when I was there, he nodded and said, "Hey, pardner," the way he usually did. What amazed me was that I still wanted to be with him. I wanted to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in the curve of his neck, just as Mom had. But then I'd see the way he looked at my mother and I'd leave.

I'd walk around the drive-in grounds, then return to the house and stand outside the kitchen in the petunia beds Mom had planted earlier in the spring by dropping seeds out the window. Batting away whining mosquitoes, I spied on her and Memphis through the screen. They talked about a lot of things, and occasionally they leaned toward each other and kissed.

One evening I heard Mom say she wondered if God would punish them for what they were doing. I shifted so that I could see them better. Memphis was in a chair, and she was at the sink, her back turned to me. I could see on her legs the straight dark seams of her nylon stockings, which as far as I knew, she hadn't worn in years. She must have put them on after I'd left the house.

She walked to his side and laid her hand on his shoulder, caressing him. "I know what we're doing is wrong, but somehow it doesn't feel that way. Even if God said it was wrong, I don't think I could stop. Do you believe in God, Charlie Memphis?"

He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. "I believe in miracles."

Chapter Six

BILLY returned to Jessup around the third week of July. A few days later he showed up at our back door, a white rectangular bandage that was gummy and soiled around the edges plastered to his forehead. "I came as soon as I could, Teal," he said in his sad, husky voice. "Uncle Toby wouldn't let me out of the house until today."

Mom smiled at him. "I'm glad you're mending so well, Billy."

He straightened and beamed in that gawky, embarrassed way he had. Then the corners of his mouth suddenly folded down. "I had to miss my dance lessons while I was gone."

Mom glanced over her shoulder at the stove. I knew she had cookies in the oven, but I didn't offer to check on them. She turned back to Billy. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I have something for you."

As usual, she fed him, bundling an egg salad sandwich in waxed paper and adding a warm oatmeal cookie. He shambled off toward the drive-in entrance, not bothering to check if Dad was in the vicinity. I wondered if the blow to his head had scrambled his brains even worse.

THAT night Mom and I ate our supper and cleaned up the dishes without saying more than a few words to each other. I bunched up the wet dish towel and dropped it on the counter.

"I'm going to sit up in the booth with Dad tonight," I announced. I frequently lied to Dad, usually to get out of trouble, but I had never made a practice of fibbing to Mom. Now I did it with a grudging anger, as if she'd forced me.

"All right." She wiped up the sink, not meeting my eyes.

I didn't visit Dad, of course. I stopped by the box office to talk with Virgil until the movie started. Then I returned to the house, intending to spy on Mom and Memphis. When I rounded the corner where I had planned to take up my usual position in the flower beds, I nearly crashed right into them. Memphis was holding the kitchen door open, and my mother teetered on the threshold, clutching his hand. I dodged behind the garden shed.

He was trying to coax her outside, but he wasn't tugging on her, the way Aunt Bliss and I had. He was just standing there and speaking to her in a voice so quiet I couldn't catch the words. My heart shot into my mouth. And I was suddenly furious with Memphis. I had told him she couldn't go out.

A thought formed in my head that I could jump from the shadows and kick him off the porch. Then I saw Mom move one foot onto the top step. He wrapped his arms around her and spoke gently to her for the longest time while every moth and mosquito within ten miles flew through the open door into our kitchen. After watching them for almost an hour, I backed away.

A few nights later I found them doing the same thing, but now he held her on the top step, never making her go farther, while he stroked her back and arms and whispered into her ear. It reminded me of the time I watched Uncle Augie break a filly to a halter. He didn't just throw it over the scared little horse's head and wait for her to stop thrashing. He let her sniff it and grow accustomed to it. Then one day he strapped it over her neck. When he finally eased the bit into her mouth, she made a little fuss, but nothing like some horses. I used to think my uncle was the most patient man I'd ever met.

They stood just inside the screen door, a bright crescent moon grinning down at them. He held her against him, his arm resting on her waist.

He ran his thumb along her cheek as though she were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. I wondered if my father had ever touched her that way. More than once he had swatted her behind, and he kissed her when she handed him the black metal dinner pail that held his sandwich and thermos, but I had never seen him caress her, never seen the dark heat I saw in Memphis's eyes.

Memphis opened the screen door, stepped onto the porch and said clearly, "I believe it's going to cool off a little. We'll be able to sleep better tonight."

He moved down the steps. Alone. I saw my mother stiffen.

He called softly to her, "Teal, the breeze is out here. It's like a light hand on your skin. Remember how it strokes you, how fresh and soothing it is on a warm night?"

"Yes."

He squatted, spread his fingers and ran them through the thick grass, then released a long breath. "How long has it been since you walked barefoot through the grass?"

"I don't know." Her voice sounded like a thin echo, full of remembering and yearning. It made me want to cry. He didn't say anything for a minute, so maybe it caught him that way too.

He stood up. "I don't guess I've done it since I was a kid. People get old too quick, putting away things that feel good, that are kind to their souls. I'm going to take these boots off, and I'm going to walk barefoot, that's what."

He strolled over to the tree stump near the rosebushes and sat down. He tugged off his tan leather boots and socks. "I'd sure like to have you with me."

No answer.

"I know you'll enjoy it. It'll bring back good memories."

The screen door opened a little more, then wavered.

"I don't know. Maybe." Her voice sounded small and distant. There was a murmur from the door.

I knew her heart was pounding, because mine was hammering against the wall of my chest.

Memphis wriggled his toes in the long grass, then strode around

the yard. "This sure feels good. Teal, did I tell you that I love you? Because I do." He started walking toward her.

I poised to spring from the shadows, to yell at him to leave her alone, that he had no right to torment her this way. But I didn't move.

Now he stood about six feet from the base of the steps, his hand extended to her. The door opened. Slowly she put one foot onto the porch, then another.

"I love you, Teal."

It took several more minutes for her to get to the second step, then to the point where the door closed behind her. She stretched her trembling hand out, but it didn't quite reach his. He could have moved forward, but he didn't.

She took one more step.

I'll always remember how they looked, washed with moonlight, only the tips of their fingers touching. She was wearing a simple cream-colored cotton dress, her cinnamon hair sprawled across her shoulders. I saw her eyes, the pupils enormous, like two deep wells that drank up the light. As if sensing the importance of that moment, the crickets quieted. Finally Mom took two more steps, and Memphis wrapped his arms around her. She leaned into him as if she had come home.

I released a quavery breath. They might have heard me then, but I don't believe they could hear or see anything but each other. All I could think about was that she was outside now, out here in the open space, and her heart hadn't given out. She was unsteady, but I hadn't lost the mother I'd protected so long.

He embraced her until she stopped shivering. All the time, he spoke quietly to her—"I don't believe I've ever held anything so soft"—tender words made even more soothing by his gentle drawl. With his arm tightly around her he led her across the yard to the Queen's Lace rosebush.

He took her out four evenings in a row, patiently walking with her, reassuring her. Each time she appeared a little more confident.

On the fifth night they played. I don't know how else to describe it. They splashed each other with water from the birdbath and

buried their faces in the roses. They ate warm, ripe tomatoes straight from the vine, drizzling juice and seeds all over their clothes. I remember thinking they were too old to do that. I liked hearing my mother's soft laughter, and I was grateful that Memphis had released her from her prison, but it angered and saddened me that he had broken her fear when I couldn't.

IT WAS during the last week in July that I found the turtle. I was trudging along Logan Highway, kicking dandelions and daydreaming about Memphis. Every once in a while a car zoomed by.

I thought of Memphis holding my mother and tried to picture his arms wrapped around me. I couldn't get the image quite right, though. His face wouldn't come into focus.

I reached down, yanked out a reed of grass and popped the clean end into my mouth. Some thirty feet away, a box turtle inched over the scorching pavement. I wondered if he was hot in that shell and if the road was blistering his feet. As I stood watching, a dusty maroon Plymouth bore down on him.

"Stop!" I screamed, thrashing my arms. The car swerved slightly, but I heard a faint crunch as it breezed past.

The turtle lay where I'd first seen him, his head and feet drawn in, his shell dented and cracked along one edge. I sank down on the hot asphalt and gathered the motionless animal to my breast. "You poor little fellow."

I don't know why I thought he was a boy, but it never crossed my mind to think otherwise. Now that I could see him up close, I realized how truly magnificent he was. A faint yellow pattern swirled across the muddy green background of his shell, as if some artist had painted elaborate and exotic designs on him. I felt a stab in my heart at the possibility he might die.

Holding him up, I peered at his tucked-in head. I lowered him onto my lap, patting him lightly, cooing and reassuring him. Wedging my finger under the crushed edge of his shell, I managed to pop it out a bit. Then I poked cautiously at his head with my forefinger. "Hey, are you alive in there?"

He was alive all right. He shot out and seized the end of my finger, clamping on to it with the ferocity of an alligator. I screamed and flailed my arms, reacting as much to the viciousness and disloyalty of the attack as to the pain.

After one long, excruciating minute I gave my wrist a quick snap and flung him off into a patch of weeds. I thrust my finger into my mouth and sucked, certain I could taste blood. When I pulled it out and examined it, the skin wasn't broken.

Nursing my injury, I set off down the road, cursing the turtle with every step. I went about forty yards before I began to consider how I might feel in his circumstances. I might have been scared, too, if a car had run over me and then someone had picked me up and stared at me with big eyes.

I turned back. He was in the same place, lying upside down and trying to right himself. I picked him up. Carrying him with my right hand outstretched, I headed toward the drive-in again.

In the snack-bar storage room, I set him on the concrete floor and hunted for a cardboard box that still had a top. The turtle remained motionless, hunched tight in his cracked shell. Once I'd found the right-sized container, I placed him inside on a clean rag. I'd made up my mind. I was going to save him.

TWO days later I was keeping Memphis company while he repaired a hole in our slat-board fence. He smacked at a bluebottle horsefly on his neck, its iridescent wings catching the light as it tumbled to the ground.

"I don't think my turtle's eaten anything since I found him."

"You still got him in that cardboard box?"

I nodded. "I put some holes in the side so's he'd get air."

Memphis looked like he was going to say something more, but he didn't speak again until he'd pounded in all the nails. Then he laid the hammer down, selected a Lucky Strike from his full pack and lit it. Drawing deeply on the cigarette, he exhaled smoke in a long gray streak. "Callie Anne, I reckon I wouldn't feel like eating if I had to stay in a box all day. Would you like to live that way?"

It bothered me that he didn't call me shortstuff or pardner. I dug the toe of my shoe into the dusty soil. "Well, no, but I don't know how else to keep him from leaving. I'd put him in my room if I thought I could hide him there. Mom wouldn't mind, but if Dad found him, he'd probably kill him, and me too."

"Why don't you let him go?"

"Because if I did that, I couldn't save him. I got some horse salve from Aunt Bliss, and I've been putting it on his wound. So it's for his own good, keeping him in the box, I mean."

I wanted Memphis to know it wasn't because I was selfish.

"What do you call this turtle?"

"John Wayne." I had no idea where the name came from. It just popped into my head and out my mouth before I had time to think about it. But as soon as I'd said it, I knew it was the right one.

"John Wayne, huh?" He was smiling through a haze of Lucky Strike smoke. "Well, he's going to have to be strong and brave to survive his treatment." He tugged on the new fence board to make sure it was secure. "Seems to me you're going to need something better'n a box for him until he gets well. I suppose we'll just have to build him a cage."

I perked up. "You mean it? You'll build a cage for John Wayne?"

He laughed. "No. I said we would. You and me, pardner."

"When?" I asked.

"Right now, seeing as how I'm done with this fence." He headed toward the concessions building, with me trotting beside him like one of Uncle Augie's bird dogs.

"Dad's not going to like it," I said.

"Well now, don't be so sure. What're you feeding this critter?"

"I put some of Mom's beef stew in a jar lid. I thought he'd eat that, but he didn't."

"Try worms and grasshoppers. A turtle wouldn't know good food if he tripped over it."

"Regular old worms?"

"Night crawlers if you can find them. Ain't gonna be easy with this drought."

"I know where I can get some. And I can catch grasshoppers too." I clapped my palms together, forming a cup. "Snag them in midair."

He stopped and eyed me. "I'll bet you can. Grab them quicker'n any frog, right?"

I grinned.

He opened the door to a storage area where Dad kept lumber and an assortment of just plain junk. Rummaging through the collection, he dragged out a piece of plywood and a length of ripped screen that had been taken off a door. "These'll do," he said. He set the plywood across two sawhorses and dug out an oversize yellow pencil and a carpenter's tape measure from Dad's toolbox. "Here, hold the end of this."

We marked the cage dimensions on the wood, and Memphis started cutting it. "You ever think about the word 'cage,' shortstuff?" he said. "Kind of grates on you, don't it? Like running your finger across a chalkboard."

I shivered at the thought.

"Cage things that are wild by nature, they'll go crazy."

I remembered that he had worked at the penitentiary. "Did the men in that prison go crazy, Memphis?"

He stared at me for a long moment, as though his mind were in some other place. Then he slowly nodded his head. "Once in a while." He handed me the end of the tape measure. He pulled it taut. "You're going to let that turtle go when it's healed, right?"

"Yes, that's what I'm going to do." I saw myself in my Florence Nightingale uniform, tears of joy in my eyes as John Wayne padded off. He lifted his clubby front foot as if he was waving good-bye. It was a bittersweet scene, one I might have watched in a movie—*The Yearling* or *So Dear to My Heart,* perhaps.

"Is that a promise?" Memphis asked.

I nodded eagerly. "Oh, yes, I promise."

I was still pondering the scene when Dad rounded the corner of the concessions building. He took in the plywood and the screen and Memphis and me. I saw the fury rush into his face.

"What are you doing?"

"Building a cage," Memphis said, low and easy. "Callie Anne here got herself a pet turtle and needs something to put it in." He straightened and looked my father directly in the eyes.

They stared at each other, momentarily locked in a standoff. I could barely find my breath. Dad's jaw muscles twitched. "I was going to use that wood for something else."

"There's plenty more in the storeroom. If it ain't enough, I'll buy some next time we go into town."

Dad didn't answer. He stood there a few seconds. Finally he hitched up his bad leg and limped off.

The trace of a smile flickered across Memphis's face.

Chapter Seven

BY THE time the water-well drillers out of Bloomfield arrived in early August, I was sure glad to see them, because we needed a distraction. It seemed like every time I looked up, Dad was tracking Memphis's movements with hunched shoulders and a hard, flat gaze, while Memphis, who was still seeing my mother nearly every evening, walked around like no one could touch him. I, on the other hand, wore a blank expression, not giving Dad anything he could grab on to.

The truck with the name FRICK AND SON DRILLING on the side pulled into the drive-in at about three in the afternoon. Harold Frick climbed out and shook hands with Dad and Memphis. It turned out he was the son in the company name, and he'd been digging wells in the tri-county area for more than twenty years.

Harold reminded me of a moving fireplug, short and solid. His neck had the color and texture of a brown leather wallet. He removed a toothpick from his mouth, turned and spit on the sand.

"Well, guess we better get busy." He turned toward the truck. "Poke, get out here."

After a long moment the door to the passenger side swung open, and a skinny guy in his early twenties climbed out and ambled toward us. His faded brown hair stuck straight up, bristly as a scrub brush. He grinned, showing a mouthful of bad teeth.

For fifteen minutes Harold tramped around in deep concentration. I hung out close by, in the shadow of the screen. Occasionally he stopped and stood motionless, as if waiting for the pull of underground currents. Then he bent down, put his nose to the earth and sniffed like a dog. Finally he yelled to Poke, who wasted about five minutes finding something—just a wrench, as it turned out—to mark the spot. The two men spent the next hour or so jockeying the truck into position.

Memphis brought out the yellow barricades and set them up around the work site. As Harold and Poke unloaded the pipe they were going to drill into the soil, Memphis took a long look at it. "Kind of big, ain't it?"

Harold squinted at him, unsmiling. "You want it as big as the old one, don't you?"

"Doesn't need to be. That one was oversize for the job it had to do. We're not irrigating the whole countryside."

Harold, who was squatting down, rose, pulled a fresh toothpick from his shirt pocket and stuck it between his lips. He rolled it from one side of his mouth to the other, assessing Memphis. "Let's see now, who's drilling this well?"

Memphis didn't answer, just studied him with amusement.

Harold finally gave up on staring Memphis down and turned away. He took one of the clamps off a long metal ladder anchored to the truck. "Poke, help me with this mast." They hooked it into place, attached a drill bit to the cable, tightened some enormous bolts, positioned the length of pipe and cranked up the engine.

Talk about a letdown. The engine wouldn't start.

They huddled over it and tinkered with it for the next hour. Just about the time I thought I could easily find something more

interesting to do, Memphis moved in to take a look. Within three minutes the engine jerked to life.

Later I heard Memphis tell Dad that Harold and Poke weren't the worst drillers he'd ever seen, but they sure as hell weren't the best either.

By Thursday they were a hundred and fifty feet into the earth, but they still hadn't hit water, so Harold decided maybe they should drill a few test wells. He went off sniffing the ground again.

Dad watched him in disgust. "Keep an eye on him," he told Memphis. "Make sure he doesn't hit oil instead."

Memphis nodded. He gave no sign that it bothered him to stay behind while Dad and I made our usual trip to town.

In Jessup, I stopped at the public library, then headed toward the Empire Theater Organization to meet Dad. ETO occupied the second floor of a two-story limestone building on Main Street. There was no one in Mr. Sooter's outer office. Iris, the secretary, had left her desk so tidy that I wondered if she'd taken the day off. The frosted-glass door to Mr. Sooter's inner office was cracked open, probably to alert him to visitors. I could hear his voice and that of my father. They apparently hadn't heard me, but then I was still using my library manners.

I quietly slid onto a metal folding chair and listened to Dad and Mr. Sooter drone on about drive-in grosses. A window fan ineffectively churned the muggy air while a schoolhouse wall clock ticked off the minutes. I opened my book, but I hadn't read more than two pages when I heard Dad mention Memphis's name. There was a noticeable pause in the conversation.

Mr. Sooter's chair groaned, a noisy protest against his bulk. "You're sure the downstairs door wasn't open?"

"Yes. I'm careful when I handle money."

"Maybe you left the key in the lock."

Dad jingled his key ring. "I always carry it with me, and I know Memphis had his because he let himself in."

"You're saying he stole the money."

I felt as though something hard had caught in my throat.

My father didn't answer, but his silence weighted the air. Dad was lying. He had to be.

Mr. Sooter's chair made a loud, complaining squeak. "Twenty dollars isn't much, not enough to call the sheriff about."

"No, but it's a nice little bonus to a man's pay."

"He's a good worker. And he saved us a lot more than twenty dollars when he caught those two robbers."

"There's something else, Mr. Sooter. Memphis killed a man."

"Where'd you hear that?"

My father's tone was cautious. "Well, sir, I can't say, but the rumor is he may have gone to prison for it."

I was starting to feel sick to my stomach.

Mr. Sooter was quiet for some time. Finally he exhaled an audible breath. "I hate to be wrong about a man, Claude. I'll have to think this over." A chair scraped across the floor. "Let me know if there are any more problems."

"I can't be responsible if—"

"You won't be." His tone switched to one of dismissal. "I said just let me know."

I was standing by the door as Dad came out.

He stopped abruptly, bracing his thigh with his hand to keep from losing his balance. "How long have you been there?"

"Just came in. I didn't want to wait in the hot truck."

He glared at me for several seconds, then opened the office door and limped out. I trailed a few steps behind him.

After we returned to the drive-in, I helped Mom with dinner and had cleanup chores to do, so it wasn't until much later that I could get away. I walked down to the creek and crawled under a weeping willow tree. Its drooping branches, touching the ground, formed a natural shelter—a refuge for thinking. I had plenty to think about.

I had been there about an hour, leaning my back against the rough tree trunk and remembering the conversation in Mr. Sooter's office, when I heard voices. Because I wasn't used to having company near the creek, I tensed a bit. Then I parted the willow branches just enough to see. I suppose I should have let them know I was there,

but I couldn't just leap out from the foliage. For one thing, Mom thought I was in the projection booth with Dad, mainly because I'd told her that, and for another, Memphis had his arm tight around her waist and his head bent over her.

He kissed her, his lips brushing her temple. "You're not afraid to go out." It was a statement, rather than a question.

"Not as long as I'm with you."

He pulled her close. "I'll hold on to you. That's easy enough."

"Charlie Memphis?"

"Hmm?"

"Who did you love before, when you were in those other places?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I could say nobody, but that'd be a lie. There were three or four I took a liking to, but for one reason or another nothing came of it." He pulled back then and looked down at her. "We can't go along like this forever, Teal. You know that, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Would you be willing, you and Callie Anne, to leave with me?" He said it quickly, in a husky voice, the way someone does when he doesn't expect the other person to agree.

It took her less than a heartbeat to answer. "Yes."

I sucked in a sharp breath, wondering what Mom was committing us to.

He turned and looked out over the field for a long time. "Are you sure you know me well enough? What if I don't turn out to be the man you think I am?"

"I know all I need to." She lifted her chin. "I'll take my chances."

There was a change in the sky now, a few dark, woolly clouds moving in and blotting out the stars. The breeze picked up.

"I won't have you living the way I do," he said. "moving from town to town. That ain't no kind of life."

"Callie Anne and I don't need much."

He laughed with a touch of bitterness. "I said something like that once to a judge when he was giving the divorce to my parents. Took me and my brother out on the back porch of the courthouse, gave

us some hard candy and asked who we wanted to live with. I told him we wanted to be with our pa, since Ma left us behind. The judge said she wanted to take us when she went away but couldn't, because of money. I told him, 'Chet and me don't eat much.' "

My mother gripped Memphis's wrists and pulled his arms tight against her, as though to remind him that that was another time.

He kept his gaze on the short, bushy trees in the distance. "All of them are gone now—Ma and Pa, Chet too," he said without any real expression in his voice. "I don't even know what happened to my brother Cal, who went with my ma."

I thought about my dream of meeting his mother and felt an unreasonable disappointment.

He looked down at Mom. "It's been a long time since I had anybody to look after. I'm not used to it. But we can get married, Teal," he said. "After we leave, you can get a divorce and we'll marry. We'll have a real family with a house. I'll figure out a way."

He kissed her hard then, slipping his hand around her waist and pulling her against him. She arched her back, allowing him to unbutton the top of her sundress and push the straps off her shoulders. He kissed her eyelids, the curve of her shoulders and the hollow at her throat. His lips moved slowly across the pale skin that swelled gently above her breasts.

I turned away. I didn't want to see this. Even at that moment, I realized it would be an image I would always keep in my mind, Memphis kissing my mother this way. I crept from under the willow, and so they wouldn't see me, I inched over the pasture on my belly, barely aware of the hard, dry grass that pricked my skin. Halfway across the field I stood and ran. When I reached the drive-in fence, I sat down hard and leaned against it, drawing in several deep breaths. I decided right then that I was learning more about love and sex and everything else in life than I had ever wanted to know, and it was all much more complicated and scary than I had expected.

As for Memphis, I realized he'd already figured out a way to get the money he needed, and it was one that would put him in jail and break my mother's heart.

FRICK AND SON DRILLING HIT water at three hundred and eighty-four feet while Dad and Memphis watched from the shade of the concessions building. Memphis said the only good thing about the operation was that they'd managed to avoid breaking the pipe at three hundred and eighty feet.

"At least Sooter got a deal on the price. How'd he wangle that?"

Dad hesitated, and his gaze shifted uneasily toward Harold and Poke. "He promised them they could drill the wells for his next two outdoor theaters." He threw his cigarette on the ground and squashed it into the dirt with his shoe. "But that won't happen. What these morons don't know is that Sooter doesn't plan to build any more drive-ins. Says they're dying out. The next theater he builds will be a hard-top."

Memphis took off his cowboy hat and ran a hand through his damp hair. "You gonna tell Harold?"

"Hell, no, and you better not say a word either. If they don't know how business works, it's not Sooter's fault—or mine."

Memphis brushed the dust off his hat and set it back on his head. "Well, Claude, it doesn't seem quite right, engaging in a battle of wits when the enemy is unarmed."

Without the least bit of hurry he adjusted his hat and strode off.

YOU'D think finding water would have been the end of it, but no. It took Harold and Poke another several days to install a pump, get it working and hook everything up to the water main. By the time they left, we were all glad to see them go.

I HAD a plan, but I had to wait until Dad and Memphis went into town together on Thursday before I could try it out. I was filling a jelly glass with water and enjoying the strong spurt from the faucet when Dad walked into the kitchen. "Get ready. We're leaving in ten minutes."

"I thought I'd stay here and finish this book I've been reading." I raised the glass to my lips and took a sip. "It's about turtles. Tells what they like to eat, where they hide out, all kinds of information."

He eyed me suspiciously. Being stuck out here, I loved to go into town, and he knew it.

I set the glass upside down on the dish drainer. Trying to keep my voice casual, I asked, "Memphis going with you?"

"Yeah. And you don't want to ride along, huh?"

"Not today."

He didn't say any more, but I suspected he didn't believe me. He knew I was up to something. He got the grocery list from Mom, and a minute later he was limping out the door. I stood at the kitchen window and watched him and Memphis climb into the pickup and pull away, leaving behind a cloud of gray dust. Just as I started toward the door, Mom lifted her head from her papers. "Sweetheart, could you listen to something I've written and tell me what you think?"

I felt a small flash of panic. On Thursdays, Dad didn't stay in town very long. I needed to get in and out of Memphis's room as quickly as possible, but Mom's face was so eager, so glowing, I couldn't refuse her. "Okay, sure."

She straightened her shoulders, cleared her throat and held up her notebook. "Give your breads and cakes a whirl. Reach into the cupboard for the Clabber Girl." She looked at me expectantly.

"Well, gosh"—I picked through my brain, trying to find something encouraging to say—"I like the part about giving breads and cakes a whirl."

"Uh-huh." She waited.

"But I think the rest of it sounds like the salt jingle."

She stared dejectedly at the scribbled lines. "I know. It's awful." Her gaze drifted off. "I just can't keep my mind on my writing lately," she murmured almost to herself. Then apparently remembering I was there, she lowered her eyes and turned a faint pink.

I shuffled my feet. "Uh . . ."

She gathered her papers together and tucked them back into her writing folder. "Thanks, sweetheart. You can run along now."

I sprinted out the door, letting it bang twice behind me, and crossed the field to the concessions building. I knew the doors there

would be locked, but I was prepared. In addition to his own key and Memphis's, Dad kept one in his bureau drawer. I used that to unlock the door.

I climbed the steps, my footsteps echoing through the eerily quiet stairwell. I hesitated before the closed door to Memphis's room, suddenly realizing that what I was about to do was wrong, even worse than eavesdropping on other people's conversations. But I didn't plan to take anything. In fact, all I wanted was to make sure something wasn't there. That couldn't be so awful.

I turned the glass knob, and the door swung open. Although the room still smelled musty, it didn't seem quite as grim as before. Memphis had cleaned the windows, letting in more light, and with his possessions scattered around, the place at least looked lived in. The wooden table was pushed against the wall now and held a carton of Lucky Strikes, a half-dozen cans of food and a small tin of chili powder. There was a magazine opened to a picture of a sleek maroon Chevrolet. A square-jawed man with a proud grin patted the fender while his smiling wife and their two freshly scrubbed children looked on. I wondered if Memphis was a Chevrolet man. That would be another reason for my father to dislike him.

Memphis had stacked his clean clothes in an apple crate. His duffel bag lay in the corner, but I went to the mattress first because in books and movies that's where people always hide their money. I lifted the feather-filled blue-striped ticking and ran my hand under it. No sign of the loot. Then I stepped over to the apple crate and flipped through the jeans and shirts. I even checked all the pockets but came up empty.

The duffel bag leered at me now like a giant green toad. It was one thing poking into belongings that were right out there for anyone to see. It was another, delving into something closed up.

I swallowed hard and crouched down. Unfolding the loose flap that covered the top, I reached my hand deep inside, latched onto something stiff and leathery and pulled it out. It was a small curved satchel with a strap that fastened on one side, a perfect container for hiding cash. But when I opened it, it held only a straight razor, a

shaving brush, Lava soap, a can of tooth powder, a toothbrush and a comb. Sticking my hand into the duffel again, I dragged out a long-sleeved flannel shirt and some wool socks, and finally I hit upon a cigar box that was tied with a black velvet ribbon. If the money was going to be anywhere, it would be in here.

I untied the ribbon and lifted the lid. Inside were two photographs, one with a sharp-featured older man and a pair of scrawny boys holding fishing poles and grinning at the camera. In the next picture the boys were older, arms thrown over each other's shoulders. Anyone could have seen the resemblance, although the younger brother had a longer nose and lighter hair.

Between the pictures was a yellowed newspaper clipping no bigger than the size of a matchbook.

> SEATTLE—A twenty-eight-year-old man, identified as John Michael Huston, was beaten to death last night outside a tavern in Seattle's waterfront district.
>
> Police said Huston had been at the same tavern the night before, when an altercation resulted in the knifing death of a sailor, Chester Lee Mathias. Authorities are seeking the sailor's brother, Charles Mathias, for questioning in Huston's death.

That was all there was to it. No date, no indication of which newspaper it came from. I returned the clipping to its place between the photos and picked up a military dog tag that was lying inscription side down. The name on it was Chester Lee Mathias.

I sat straight up when I heard the unmistakable clunk of the heavy exterior door, then the familiar thud of heel against wood. Cowboy boots. Frozen, I stared at the open door. Memphis was supposed to be with Dad in Jessup. They were to be gone at least two hours. If I hadn't panicked, I might have hidden under the bed or behind the door. But I stayed where I was, on the floor, surrounded by his belongings.

I could have sworn it took an hour for those boots to climb the stairs. In the meantime I died at least twice.

He stopped at the landing and poked his head inside the room.

His freckles had disappeared into a golden tan, but his serene eyes stood out, bluer than ever. "Hi, Callie Anne."

I tried breathing again. "Hi, Virgil."

He gestured toward the stairwell. "The door was unlocked."

I nodded.

He glanced around, first at the signs of plunder, then at me. "What are you doing in here?"

My first instinct was to invent a story, but I couldn't.

"I'm trying to find out if Memphis took some money."

He curved his perfect mouth into a frown. "He wouldn't do that."

I had the sudden urge to cry and blubber it all out, but instead I drew an uneven breath and stood. Surprised at how wobbly my legs were, I sank onto Memphis's bed. "I heard Dad tell Mr. Sooter that some of the box-office money was missing and the only person who could have taken it was Memphis." I repeated word for word as much of the conversation as I could recall. My relief was tremendous. I felt as though I were shifting this burden, ever so briefly, to Virgil.

He listened carefully, seeming to turn it over in his mind but not registering the shock or concern I expected. "Your dad's real careful about the money, Callie Anne. I can't imagine him saying Memphis stole it if he didn't, but I can't imagine Memphis taking it either." There was a long pause. "I just don't think he's that kind of man."

"But I found something. Look at this." I still had the cigar box in my hand. I removed the newspaper clipping from between the two photos and held it out for Virgil to see.

He read it and shrugged. "So?"

"Don't you see? This could mean Memphis is Charles Mathias. You said he told you he murdered somebody."

"I did not. He said he was in a fight where someone was killed."

I picked up the dog tag and held it out, the chain draping across my fingers. "Well, look at this."

His gaze remained on me. "Callie Anne, you're poking into somebody's private belongings. What you're doing is plain wrong."

I looked down at my feet, suddenly feeling pretty low.

He surveyed the scattered clothes, the toiletries case, the open cigar box. "You didn't find it, did you?"

"What?"

"The money."

I shook my head.

"I didn't think so. Where is Memphis?"

"He's in town with Dad. Why'd you come up here?"

His eyes seemed to fade a shade or two. He sat down next to me on the bed and rested his rawboned hands on his thighs. He was close enough to touch but not too close. "My dad sent me over. He said I have to quit working here to help with the haying. It starts tomorrow."

"Can't you change his mind? Just until the drive-in closes."

"I tried. We had a big fight about it. He said I'd better make up my mind the farm comes first. I hate farming, Callie Anne. I hate cows and hogs and manure and hay. Hay makes me sneeze. Most of all, I hate hogs, though."

"I like horses."

"Well, yeah, I like horses too. I rode over here on Buck. Dad says I can't drive the truck again until I make up my mind about my responsibility."

There was that word again, the one adults used like a hammer.

We were both quiet for a moment, pondering the burden and the unfairness of it all. "I wish I had a brother my dad could turn into a farmer," Virgil said. "Then maybe he'd forget about me."

"What would you do if you could do anything you wanted?"

"That's easy. I'd build airplanes." His eyes brightened. "Pretty soon they'll have ones that can fly fifteen hundred miles an hour. Just imagine that. Fifteen hundred miles an hour."

"Gosh," I said. "Is there a place around here where you can build planes?"

"No. I'd have to go to California. That's where the biggest aircraft companies are." His eyes blazed with passion. Watching him drift away from me, I burst into tears.

"Callie Anne, what's wrong?"

I could feel my whole body shaking like a wringer washing machine. Lifting my head, I hiccuped, "I don't . . . you . . ."

He put his face close to mine, so close I could feel his breath on my cheek. "What?"

I swallowed hard. "I don't want you to go away."

He scooted closer and looped his arm around me, and I felt the warmth of his hand through my blouse. "That's not for a long time. I have two years of high school left, and then I'd have to go to college."

I sat up straight. "Well, I'm not going to stay here forever, you know. I'm going to do something exciting. I'll be a . . . a writer." I'd never thought before about what I wanted to do, but now it all seemed to fall exactly into place. Visions of Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain bobbed in my head. Why not? "A writer can travel anywhere. I could go to California if I want to."

Feeling his warm breath on my temple, I turned to gaze nearsightedly at him. His arm now loosely embraced my shoulder.

"You look pretty when your eyes are like that," he said. He reached down and softly, ever so softly, pressed his lips to mine. I noted with vague surprise that we didn't bump noses. In fact, I would never have guessed that it would work as well as it did. In time I felt only the touch of his mouth.

I don't know how long the kiss lasted, but when he pulled back, I felt all tingly on the inside and quivering on the outside. Just as I realized I wanted Virgil to kiss me again, he rose to his feet. "We'd better clean this up before your dad and Memphis come back."

My dad? Memphis? I'd forgotten all about them.

He knelt down beside the duffel bag. "Do you think you can remember how all this went in?"

I nodded. I was confused. Is that what you were supposed to do? You kissed somebody and then pretended it hadn't happened? Maybe I hadn't done it right. I felt bewildered and embarrassed.

We stuffed Memphis's possessions back into the green canvas bag and tidied up. Then he turned and smiled at me, and my disappointment vanished. I felt like a million bucks.

Dreamily I glanced around the room. As far as I could recall, it

looked the way it had when I came in. We walked down the narrow stairs, our hips bumping against each other every few steps.

After I locked the door, we headed toward the theater entrance, Virgil's arm across my shoulders. We were standing halfway between the concessions building and the box office, staring wordlessly into each other's eyes, when Dad's Ford pulled in. We jumped apart.

Dad parked the truck, stepped out and considered us for a few moments without speaking. I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Virgil walked over to him. "Mr. Benton, I was wondering if I could talk with you." He sounded stiff and nervous. He trailed Dad into the concessions building, his shoulders bent under the weight of what he had to tell him.

Chapter Eight

I HAD the uneasy feeling I'd run into Mom and Memphis sometime, that I'd be out roaming and accidentally come face to face with them. And that's just what happened.

They were walking along White River Road, keeping to the shoulder, although it wasn't well traveled. The sky was streaked pink and blue, setting itself up for a spectacular sunset, and I could smell clover drifting from somewhere. My first instinct was to bolt into the nearby cornfield, but it was too late for that. They had already seen me.

Memphis waved without a trace of embarrassment. "Hey there, pardner."

I felt goose bumps on my arms. If I could come upon them like this, so could someone else. My father was at the drive-in, of course. Once the movie started, he had to change the reel every twenty minutes. But what if . . . I hated what-ifs.

Memphis gestured toward the barricaded cutoff that led to the White River bridge. "We're going down there. Want to come?"

My jaw fell open in astonishment. I couldn't believe my mother would go. Her last visit to the old wooden bridge a quarter mile in that direction stuck in my mind like a splinter of glass.

I stared at her. "Mom?"

She brushed a strand of hair back from her face and looked at me. "It's all right. I want to."

"You do?"

She straightened her shoulders and nodded, but I saw the flash of uncertainty there. Memphis glanced from me to her, as though he were trying to understand the foreign language we were speaking.

"You okay?" he asked. "You don't have to do this, you know."

She shook her head and kept going.

Just beyond the curve I heard the river's low, steady rush and saw the plank bridge that arched over its banks. I'd been here hundreds of times before. I glanced at Mom. Her eyes had the glazed look of a bird that's hit a window, but she didn't turn back.

She stopped at the edge of the bridge. The planks were old and dry, thousands of cracks running through the wood like dark threads. "Here," she whispered, her breathing deep and fast. "This is it."

He turned to her. "What happened here?"

She locked her hands onto her wrists. "I couldn't walk across that bridge. I made it to the edge, but I couldn't go any farther. I couldn't move." Her voice grew low and husky, close to tears.

Memphis waited for her to stop shaking. "It's over," he said quietly, taking her hand. He put his other hand on her shoulder, not exactly hugging her, but holding her a short distance from him, the way he might if they were dancing.

I turned away. It was obvious they didn't need me. I decided I might as well go on home, where I could read a book or talk to my turtle if I wanted some real company. As I stepped onto the road, I heard a twig snap behind me, a sound as sharp as a bone cracking.

I whirled around. In a nearby clearing stood a man. We formed a triangle: my mother in Memphis's arms, the intruder, and I. A

single shaft of light caught me in the eyes, so that I couldn't see his face. I moved a few feet sideways and breathed again.

It was Billy. Only Billy.

Then I realized he was staring at Mom and Memphis in fish-eyed astonishment. It was as if a curtain in his head had briefly parted, so that some form of understanding now mingled with his craziness.

He opened his mouth. At first only a hoarse rattle clawed its way from his throat. His chest rose and fell with deep breaths. Then a howl of anguish split the air, a wail so deep and sorrowful it might have come from a dying animal.

Mom spun around, her eyes wide with alarm. "Oh, no. Billy?" She stepped toward him, her arms outstretched like a mother's. "No, don't, Billy. It's okay."

Then she seemed to realize she was leaving the safety of Memphis's arms, and she retreated. Billy flung his arms across his head the way men do in the movies when bombs drop from the sky. He lurched toward the road, breathing hard.

I ran after him, my mother's worried voice fading behind me.

The sun had melted into the horizon, leaving a luminous pink glow. He hurried along the old, unused highway, his head bent, his pace twice as fast as usual. His shoulders shook either from sobs or rage. I couldn't see his face, so I didn't know which.

At the northern edge of a farm, he cut in at a right angle and followed a rutted grass-and-dirt roadway that was used more by tractors and hay trucks than by automobiles. Occasionally he made a sort of whimpering sound, but he never looked back. After a while I gave up bothering to hide. I just stayed about fifty feet behind him.

A good mile later we came to the railroad tracks. The moon was up now, enough to see Billy's hunched figure plodding between the rails. I didn't really know why I was following him. I guess I thought someone should look after him.

We'd trekked another melancholy mile or so when Billy suddenly stopped. He drifted toward the trees, then reappeared from the shadows with an armful of broken tree branches. He began to arrange them teepee-fashion between the rails.

"Uh, Billy . . ."

He didn't even glance at me. He vanished into the shadows again and returned a few minutes later with some straw, which he added to the teepee. He produced a lighter from his pocket.

I stiffened. "Gosh, Billy, could we talk about this?"

He didn't answer.

I heard a scraping sound, then saw a streak of sparks. A thin blue flame flicked out and caught the straw and the withered leaves on the tree branches.

"Oh, jeez, Billy. Oh, jeez."

A few seconds later I heard what he must have sensed—the low, distant rumble of the train. I thought about scattering the kindling, but it was too late for that. The flames flared several feet in the air. Billy had disappeared. The engine's enormous round light rolled along the tracks, glowing whiter than the moon.

When it came within a boxcar length, the train ground to a screaming, clattering halt, spitting up rocks and black, gritty soot. I dove off the side of the tracks and tumbled into the weeds, lifting my head just enough to see what was happening. Two men dressed in gray-striped railroad overalls hopped down from the engine. They stood in the bright glow of the single headlight, kicking out the fire with their heavy black boots.

"Darn kids," one of them growled.

They stomped around and cursed for several minutes, then climbed back onto the long freight train. Eventually it creaked, groaned and snaked back into the night.

Once it had gone, I stood up and looked around. There was no sign of Billy.

The next day I hiked back along the tracks looking for him. I couldn't find him, and the farmers along the way said they hadn't seen him either. In my heart I believed he had hopped that freight train and he was going to travel just as far as it would take him.

IN THE middle of the day, about two weeks after Billy and I took that midnight hike along the railroad tracks, a stranger came to the

drive-in. I was emptying a bushel basket full of trash into the garbage can when he pulled his dusty black sedan into the shade of the concessions building.

For a minute or so, he sat in his car writing something in a notebook. Then he opened the driver's door, uncoiled himself from his seat and stepped out. What struck me immediately was that he wore a dark suit despite the ninety-degree heat. With his slick brown hair parted at the side and his gaunt look, he put me in mind of a funeral director. His gaze fell on me.

"Your dad around?" he asked.

I nodded. "Upstairs."

Without saying more, he walked to the front of the concessions building, and I set down the bushel basket and followed him. His hard pale eyes slowly surveyed the field, as though he thought someone might be hiding behind a speaker pole. Memphis had gone inside a few minutes before.

I felt the back of my neck prickle. I cleared my throat. "Uh, do you want me to get my dad?"

Not even glancing at me, he said, "Sure, honey, you do that."

I hurried around the corner to the back door of the concessions building and charged in, nearly colliding with Memphis, who was carrying a screwdriver in his hand.

He reached out to steady me. "Whoa there, where's the fire?"

"I was just going to fetch Dad." I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the man hadn't followed me. Turning back, I lowered my voice. "You weren't heading out, were you?"

He held up the screwdriver. "I've got the wrong size for that door hinge that's popped off in the storeroom. I think your dad's got one in his truck that'll work."

I backed toward the door. "I'll get it. You stay right here. Don't go outside." My voice sounded a little shrill. "There's a man I've never seen before. He's wearing a dark suit and . . . and . . ." I didn't know how to describe him.

Memphis gave me a long, searching look. Finally he said quietly, "All right. That hinge will wait. You go on up and get your father."

I took the stairs two at a time and found Dad at his desk, entering figures in a ledger. I wet my lips nervously. "Someone's here to see you. He's out front."

Dad grunted, not particularly happy about the interruption. He clung to the rail as he descended the stairs, and following him, I could see how unsteady his leg was. Outside, the stranger shook hands with Dad and displayed some kind of badge or license in a leather wallet.

Dad leaned against the concessions building, taking the weight off his bad leg. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a man."

I sucked in a breath.

"About six foot three. Lean. Thirty-five years old. No steady job, but you've probably seen him around."

I nearly fainted.

"His name's William Watson."

In my relief I must have sounded like a car tire deflating.

Dad shook his head. "Don't think I know him—"

"Yes, you do," I interrupted. "He means Billy."

"His uncle said you ran him out of here on several occasions," the man said, his voice displaying a mistrustful tone.

Dad folded his arms over his midsection. "Damned right I did. He was bad for business, always sticking his head in people's cars."

The man glanced at his open notebook. "Guess he had a little accident just outside the theater, is that right?"

"I didn't bump him off, if that's what you mean. He got clipped by a car on the highway," Dad said.

"Look, Mr. Benton," the man said in a flat voice, "I'm just trying to get a lead on Watson. His uncle's worried he might be injured. Or still disoriented from the accident. The doctors at the hospital said all he talked about after his accident was coming out here again."

"Well, like I told you, he hasn't been around." Dad turned to me. "How about you, Callie Anne? Have you seen him?"

The stranger's unblinking eyes settled on me. I shook my head, almost too quickly. Dad's gaze dragged over me. I must have done

something to give myself away, because he gave a skeptical sniff.

The man scribbled a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Dad. "You can reach me here if you think of something."

"I'll do that," Dad said with a trace of impatience. He was still eyeing me.

After the man left, I started toward the house.

"Hold on there," Dad said. "When did you see him?"

I turned, feeling the perspiration tickle my upper lip. "Who?"

"You know who."

"I didn't," I said, my voice sounding high and thin.

"Yeah, right," Dad muttered dryly. He opened the door, then stopped and stared at me for a moment. "What's going on here?" he asked softly.

I looked down at my feet.

"What's going on here?" he asked again, and I knew he meant more than Billy.

I shook my head. "Nothing."

He leaned against the doorjamb for a moment and pushed his thumb and index finger against his forehead, kneading the spots above his eyebrows. "All right," he said wearily. He stepped inside, and the door shut behind him.

THAT evening I came close to telling Dad he might be in mortal danger. At first the prospect of Memphis as a murderer, a gunslinger in some faraway western town, had seemed thrilling, but the reality of it in my own backyard gave me the shivers. Suppose he killed Dad so he could marry Mom, but nobody knew it was him. Then Mr. Sooter would hire him to run the theater, and he'd live in our house with us. I could see all the frightening possibilities.

I walked up to the booth and stood in the doorway, watching the shadowy lights from the projector play over Dad's face.

He looked up. "What?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Why don't you come in?"

I sighed. "Maybe later." I couldn't seem to stay in that room for

long anymore. If I sat there with him, watching the movies as we had so often done, I'd have to warn him about Memphis. But I couldn't warn him without telling him how I knew, and I couldn't betray my mother.

I left him shaking his head.

LATER that evening I did something I'd never done before. I called a boy on the telephone. It took me more than an hour to work up the courage, and then I had to wait until Mom left the house with Memphis to carry through with it. We kept our telephone in the living room on a hip-high wooden cabinet with drawers for pencils and paper and shelves for books and magazines. I dragged out the barely used phone book that served Jessup and a few other towns in our part of the county. It didn't quite stretch to Boagle Corner, where Aunt Bliss and Uncle Augie lived, but it did contain the number I wanted. I poked my finger into the cutouts on the black rotary dial and spun the numbers.

A man's voice, thick with a foreign accent, came on the line.

I think I squeaked a little. "Is Virgil there?"

I almost hung up during the few minutes it took for him to come to the phone. When he did answer, his voice sounded too low to be the person I knew.

I gripped the receiver nearly hard enough to crack it. "Hi, it's Callie Anne."

He didn't say anything for a moment, and I felt a click of panic, thinking maybe he'd be upset I was calling him.

"Oh, hello," he said.

We traded "How are you?" and cruised into another moment of silence.

The receiver was slick in my damp hand, and I almost dropped it. "Virgil, there's something I want to talk with you about. Could we meet someplace tomorrow?"

The party line double-clicked, and I thought I heard another set of lungs puffing in the background.

"What?" Virgil said.

"Oh, nothing."
"Callie Anne?"
"Yeah."
"Where the highway meets the old quarry road. Three o'clock."
"Thanks, Virgil," I breathed.

I DON'T know what Virgil told his dad to get away from the farm. Standing alone at the turnoff to the quarry, we became shy and didn't say more than a quick hello. As we walked west along the rutted dirt road, I balanced on saw-toothed ridges that big truck tires had at some earlier time cut into the muddy ground. The summer sun had baked them hard as clay. We stopped once to examine the fresh carcass of a brown cottontail rabbit.

"What do you suppose got it?"

"Coyote, maybe."

On telephone wires across the way, two sleek black crows waited for us to pass so they could return to their meal.

We'd walked no more than a few yards when we heard the sharp clink-clink of metal hitting rock. Past a grove of trees, we saw five bareheaded men standing like statues atop a grassy rise. With their baggy black-and-white jailhouse pajamas they looked as though they had just stepped out of a prison movie. Another man, his brown pants cinched tight at the waist and his shirtsleeves rolled up his sunburned arms, gripped a shiny-barreled rifle. A tan Stetson shadowed his face. It took me a moment to realize the five convicts were shackled at the legs, strung together like bass on a fishline. A tall, muscular Negro was among them, his forehead a glistening chestnut color. There weren't many Negroes or chain gangs around Jessup, and I suppose I stared.

A white prisoner with shoulders the size of Sunday hams leaned on the shovel or hoe, or whatever tool it was he was holding, and let out a whistle that could have been heard to state route 231. "Hey, girlie," he yelled. "Come on over."

One of the other men waved his arms. "Right here, honey. I've got something to show you."

I stood there longer than I should have, rooted in that spot, looking down at myself and wondering what I had done to make them talk to me that way. Even from a distance I could see an eagerness in their stance, an invitation unlike any I had ever had from a man before. The thought that I might have done something to deserve it filled me with a mixture of wonder and shame.

The convict with the burly shoulders pinned me in a thirty-yard stare. "Give her a couple of years, and she'll be jailbait."

"Hell, I wouldn't turn her away now," someone else said, and they all hooted with laughter.

I felt Virgil's hand on my wrist, tugging at me. "Come on, Callie Anne. Let's get out of here."

We ran the rest of the quarter mile to the quarry, the shackled men's catcalls still echoing in my ears.

The spring-fed pit was rimmed by limestone boulders, rocky outcroppings and a couple of hollows the stonecutters had fashioned when they scooped away the rock. Out of breath, we flopped onto a sandy ledge on one side of the quarry. I pressed my back and limbs against the hot, dusty grains that were white as salt. Here and there gnarled trees split the rocks, but they hung so far over the water that we got little benefit from their shade. The sun hovered above me like a bright yellow saucer, and when I closed my eyes, I could still see it floating there. For several minutes I lay drowsily motionless, letting the fuzzy warmth seep into me and the sand sting my legs below my red shorts.

When I finally sat up, I saw that Virgil was watching dragonflies skitter across piercingly clear quarry water that was the color of new grass. He had his arms wrapped around his knees.

I scooped up a handful of sand. "Yesterday a detective came to the drive-in."

His eyes widened. "Looking for Memphis?"

I shook my head. "Nope. Looking for Billy Watson."

He shrugged. "Yeah. I heard he was missing."

I kicked off my shoes. "That chain gang back there made me think of something. Do you suppose Memphis was ever in prison?"

Virgil moved his head slightly, and I saw a glint of pale blond hair along his jawline. "He worked in one, didn't he?"

"Yeah. That's what he said." I peeled off my white bobby socks and stuffed them into my shoes. "But I wonder if there's more to it than that." I leaned forward and lowered my voice. "First there's the possibility that Memphis killed somebody. Then there's that newspaper clipping about two men with the same first name as Memphis and his brother, and there's the dog tag with the name of the dead brother. Only it doesn't say Chester Memphis. It says Chester Mathias." I bent closer. "Come on, Virgil. You have to admit that Charlie Memphis has a dark, hidden past."

Virgil's eyebrows rose a notch. "You want to know what I think, Callie Anne?"

"What?"

"I think you see too many movies."

I leaned sideways toward the water, cupped my hands under the surface and threw all that I could hold straight at him. Most of it drizzled onto the sand before it hit his green-checked shirt, but it had the effect I wanted. With a lopsided grin he lunged for me.

I jumped up and spun away, taunting him. "Guess that'll show you."

I don't know what I thought it showed him, because a few seconds later I was scrambling onto one of the limestone boulders and he was grabbing at my ankles. We were both laughing. When I skidded on the slippery rock, he caught me and gripped me by the back of my shorts and blouse.

I squealed, "Don't! My glasses . . ."

He held me with one strong fist and reached his long arm around me. "Give 'em here."

I laughed and shook my head.

He clutched tighter. "Better do it."

I could have fought harder, but I didn't mind the prospect of that cool, velvety water. I handed my glasses over, and he slipped them into his shirt pocket. With the ease of a farmer handling a bag of feed he tossed me over the edge. I curled forward and splashed

headfirst, pinching my nose and clamping my mouth. I sank as if falling through silk.

I had been swimming in that quarry before and knew it was so deep I couldn't touch bottom. I rose slowly to the top, keeping my eyes open and watching a troop of minnows parade by. The rubber band on my ponytail had snapped when I hit the water, and now my hair floated loosely around my shoulders. Virgil was squatting on the rock, grinning. Although he had peeled off his shirt and folded it into a neat little bundle with my glasses on top, he didn't jump in.

It flashed through my head how strong he looked in spite of his gangly limbs and rope-skinny torso. He had the broad shoulders a farm kid gets from pitching hay bales onto a truck all day. Dog-paddling around in that water, I felt a glow come over me, and I had the sudden urge to perform for him. I had always been a good swimmer and could stay underwater until my lips turned blue. I dove deep, so that my feet split the surface and pointed straight toward the sky. Coming up, I felt transformed from a scrawny tomboy into something quite graceful. I languidly curved my arms and scissor-kicked my way through the cool water, my legs rhythmically opening and closing.

Virgil was watching me with a glimmer in his eyes.

I smiled a proud little smile and glided and dipped as if I'd just been asked to swim with Esther Williams.

The sun was at a four-o'clock angle when I scooted onto a silvery white rock, its heat warming my wet bottom. I twisted a stream of water from my hair. "Woulda brought my bathing suit if I'd known you were going to throw me in."

He didn't answer. I glanced up at him and realized he was staring at me. I squirmed under his gaze. "What?"

He pulled back and, with his head turned slightly away and his eyes lowered, touched his long, knobby fingers to my bare arms. In spite of their warmth, I shivered.

"You're beautiful," he murmured.

The sun circled behind his head, sparkles coming off it like slivers

of glass. His shadowed eyes were so dark they didn't look blue at all. Pushing my face into the hollow of his neck, I drew in the warm moistness of his skin. He smelled like hay and apples.

We sat together like that for several minutes while I thought about what might occur next. If it had been anyone but Virgil, I might have been scared. Maybe I wasn't afraid of him, because his gentle hands were accustomed to tugging on cow's udders, or maybe because he possessed an easygoing, hardworking reliability. It might have been simply because he drove a Ford truck. Anyway, I trusted him.

A starling landed in a branch above our heads and scolded, knocking down thumb-size seedpods that plopped onto the rocks. That noise seemed to bring Virgil back. He released me, and his eyes turned blue again, matching the sky. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

I tugged at my wet clothes, straightening them. "It's okay," I said, knowing my words didn't begin to convey what I felt inside.

Avoiding the chain gang, we chose another path back to the highway. Neither one of us said a word about what had happened.

I RETURNED to the quarry the next evening, an hour after sundown. I hadn't had the nerve to call Virgil again, but I hoped he would somehow know I was there. I wanted to see him, and as much as I worried it might be wrong, I wanted his hands on me again.

The quarry was different at night, the water black and glittery. The moon was so bright the surrounding boulders and foliage made deep shadows on the motionless pool. I didn't swim but sat on the edge of the still warm rocks and dangled my feet in the water. I thought about how John Wayne would like it here and decided next time I'd bring him with me.

Crawling into one of the hollows the stonecutters had fashioned when they scooped out the rock, I lay with my head on my flattened palm. I thought about what it might be like to marry Virgil. The floor of the small man-made cave was cool on my back and smelled like damp leaves.

They came then, their feet padding softly on the limestone. I

knew what their presence here meant. She had crossed the White River bridge. She had to, to get this far.

They moved slowly, quietly, as if under some spell. They stood close to the sandy boulder where Virgil and I had sat. Clenching my teeth hard, I willed them to go. The quarry was mine and Virgil's, and they were trespassing on my territory now.

I couldn't go, at least not easily. I had reached the scooped-out boulder by crawling onto the rock next to them. Leaving any other way meant a five-foot drop.

Memphis clasped Mom around the waist and pulled her against him. "I'll have the money in a few weeks," he told her.

He began to kiss her. She tipped her head back, closing her eyes. He ran his lips over her, urgently pressing words against her cheeks and mouth. "We'll go to New Orleans. Would you like that? I know people there, and I can get a job."

"Yes," she said, allowing him into the curve of her neck. He lingered there a few moments, probably breathing in her fragrance. As a child, I had nuzzled that very place myself and knew its sweet softness.

He knelt on the sandy rock at her feet and gathered the scalloped hem of her white dress in his hands. Slowly he began lifting it to her waist.

My face grew hot. I crawled out of my dark hiding place, scrambled over the rock, away from their line of sight, and jumped the five feet to the ground. I don't know if they heard me, and I no longer cared. I ran all the way back to the drive-in, knowing with a stomach-tightening certainty this couldn't continue.

AN HOUR later I was sitting cross-legged on the bench outside the concessions building trying to watch *Fire Maidens of Outer Space,* a silly movie but one that had attracted a fair number of people, when Dad came charging out of the concessions building, limping as fast as his legs would carry him.

He spotted me and jerked to a halt. "You seen Memphis?"

I shook my head too hard and too quickly.

Dad's hand came down on my shoulder like a vise. "Where is he?"

"I don't know."

He squeezed the muscle in my shoulder until it hurt, and I yelped.

"You're lying to me, missy. I know you're lying to me."

He released me, and I stood up from the bench and moved a few steps away, rubbing the sore muscle with my fingers. "I haven't seen him. Why do you want him?"

"A pipe in the snack bar sprung a leak," Dad snapped. "I had to turn off the water, but I can't keep it off. People'll be wanting to use the rest rooms." He glanced at the screen, and images of light and dark played across his face. "I don't have time to fix it myself. That reel's going to run out in a minute." He turned back to me, but then his gaze caught something over my shoulder.

I looked behind me and saw Memphis walking from the direction of our house. Apparently unconcerned, he moved with long, easy strides, his hands jammed into his pants pockets like a man who has just returned from an evening in town. My heart was thudding like a jackhammer.

Dad limped over to him. "Where have you been?"

A tense smile played across Memphis's lips. "I'm on my own time now."

Just then the movie screen went black, like a curtain falling. Within seconds the sounds of car horns split the air.

"I got a pipe that's sprung a leak," Dad hissed. "Get in there and fix it." His glittery black eyes changed direction and focused on our dimly lit house. "I ever catch you over there, I'll break your neck." Then he swung around and limped hurriedly into the concessions building.

Memphis didn't rush to follow him. Passing me, he rested his hand briefly on my shoulder. "How you doing, pardner?"

I had barely enough breath in my lungs to answer him. "Okay."

I KEPT thinking I should warn Mom about Memphis, that I should tell her about the newspaper clipping and the dog tag. But

I knew she was even less likely than Virgil to believe me. In one of those books I had read, someone wrote that people in love lose their good sense, and I could see that Mom's had fallen through a crack.

I was starting to have stomachaches about this time, the kind you get when your insides feel as tight as a fist and no amount of Grape Nehi seems to help. Sometimes the pain would wake me up in the middle of the night, and I'd have to hug my knees against my belly until it went away. I didn't complain about it, though, because I didn't want to visit Doc Graham. He had a habit of giving me a shot every time I saw him, and the sight of that needle coming at me was more than I could bear.

Memphis had told Mom he would have all the money he needed in a few weeks, and the thought that he might steal it began to haunt me. If Mom really did plan for us to run off with him, we might be leaving with not only a murderer but a thief. In the short time left I might not be able to find out if he had killed someone, but I figured I could at least determine if he was a thief. I came up with a plan—not a great one, but a simple test of his honesty. To put it into effect, I needed a dollar bill.

I waited until I heard Mom in the bedroom snapping the clean bedsheets into place, and then I slipped a dollar from the cocoa tin in the kitchen cupboard. I felt pretty low in spite of my good intentions, but I told myself I'd return it before she ever missed it. And if Memphis swiped it? Well, I'd just have to tell her why I couldn't give it back.

My plan wasn't complicated. I knew Memphis ate dinner at noon, preparing it in the snack bar, often using the hot plate and other equipment there. That's where the dollar bill would be, in plain view on the snack bar.

I laid the dollar on the counter and hid near the entrance to the ladies' room when I heard Memphis enter the concessions building. He opened a tin can and poured the contents into a saucepan. After several minutes I pretended to emerge from the rest room. "Hi, Memphis."

"Hey there, pardner." He sprinkled some red powder over the pan. "How's that turtle of yours?"

"He's almost well. I'm going to let him go soon." It was a lie. Just stroking John Wayne's rubbery hide during the past few weeks had given me some measure of comfort, and I realized now I couldn't stand the thought of releasing the only pet I'd ever owned.

"Good," Memphis said, " 'cause you should turn him loose before winter comes."

"What are you making?" I asked as my gaze swept the counter. The dollar was missing, and I had the abrupt sensation of my heart nudging my belly button.

"Frijoles. Ever had frijoles?" He stirred the mixture, as unconcerned as if he swiped money all the time.

"I don't think so," I murmured. "I don't guess Mom's ever made them." I glanced around, hoping that he had just pushed the dollar out of the way.

The powerful aroma of his dinner swept over me, and what had smelled so appealing while I hid in the shadows suddenly made my stomach lurch. My dollar—my mother's dollar—was gone, and I couldn't think what to do.

"Cowboy beans, we used to call them out west," he said, slurping a big spoonful of the lumpy reddish brown mush. "You want a taste?"

I peered woozily at him, tiny black spots dancing in front of my eyes. I was in a tunnel, and the dark walls were closing in on me. Reaching for something to grab on to, I swayed unsteadily.

"Callie Anne?" His voice sounded distant, like someone slowly turning the radio down. The next thing I knew someone switched off the sound—and the light.

When I woke up, I was bouncing up and down and my head was tucked into warm, damp fabric that had a familiar musky smell. It took a few seconds to realize Memphis was running with me and my face was squashed against his tan shirt. Mom must have seen him coming across the field, because she met us at the door. "What happened?" I could hear hysteria in her voice.

"I'm all right. Put me down."

"She fainted. Tumbled right onto the floor, but she ain't hurt." He carried me to my pink chenille bed.

"Watch her, please, Charlie Memphis." Mom dashed to the bathroom and came back with a cold washcloth, which she pressed against my forehead. "Tell me where it hurts, sweetheart. Do you feel sick to your stomach?"

"I'm okay. I just want to sit up."

"She's not really hurt. I caught her before she hit the floor."

Mom tugged off my shoes and bobby socks, obviously glad to have something to do. She lifted her eyes to his and smiled. "Thank you, Charlie Memphis."

He put his hand lightly on her shoulder, and there passed between them a look so tender and affectionate no one could have misunderstood it.

"I'll check later to see how she is." He glanced out the window. "Claude should be coming back anytime, and I've got to take care of something with him before it brings me trouble." He looked down at me. "You get better now, pardner."

I was just about ready to smile when I remembered he had stolen my mom's money.

As soon as he was out the door, Mom pulled my pink-flowered cotton pajamas from under my pillow and shook them out. "Put these on while I get the thermometer. I think you have a fever."

I sighed, deciding I was probably destined to spend the rest of the day in bed. Just as I heard the door to the medicine chest creak, I remembered what Memphis had said. Something that might get him into trouble with my dad.

I leaped from my bed and scrambled to the window. He was already halfway across the drive-in field, and my father had parked his truck behind the concessions building and was walking toward the entrance that led to the projection booth.

I tore out of the house. The hot sun pressed down on me and the gravel bit into my bare feet, but I kept on, thinking only of reaching Memphis before he got to my father.

Behind me, Mom was yelling from the door, "Callie Anne! What are you doing out there?"

I was sweating and puffing by the time I reached him. "Memphis, don't give him the dollar. It's Mom's, but don't give it to her either. She doesn't have anything to do with it. It was my plan, but it was stupid. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

He bent down, his tanned face so close to mine I could see the thin white lines that webbed the skin near his eyes. "I think you'd better tell me what's going on, pardner."

I took a deep breath. The words flooded out, cascaded over each other in one long, muddled confession. I told him everything, about thinking he had killed someone, about hearing Dad in Mr. Sooter's office and searching his room, about Virgil kissing me, about borrowing the money from my mother and trying to entrap him in the snack bar. Midway through, I was sobbing. I may have even told him I loved him.

I can't imagine how he understood it all, but he didn't ask me a single question.

"Run along now," he said in a low voice, "and give the money back to your ma."

I gazed up at him through a wet film. His face had darkened, although at the time I had thought it was merely in shadow. My relief was so tremendous, so deep and cleansing that I didn't immediately recognize the fierceness in his eyes.

"All right," I snuffled, turning back toward the house. I walked slowly, still feeling light-headed and queasy. Mom was holding the door open for me, urging me inside. I made it all the way to our picket fence when I realized what was going to happen.

I whirled around and surveyed the parking field. A crow perched on the speaker pole near where Memphis had been standing, but he wasn't in sight. I started running.

"Callie Anne," Mom called from the house.

I didn't even turn to look at her. I ran back across the field, slowing down only when I approached the glass-windowed entrance of the concessions building. One of the doors was propped open with

a cinder block to let in fresh air. I slipped into the snack-bar lobby. Standing there for a moment, I took in the lingering smell of cowboy beans that sat cooling on the hot plate. The empty can and the tin of chili powder cluttered the counter.

When I heard the footsteps, I instinctively dropped to the floor, out of view behind the bar. Dad tromped over to the sink; then there was a clank and a splash and an angry curse. I crouched against the sliding wooden doors of the glass-fronted candy case, holding my breath.

At that moment I heard the click-click of cowboy boots crossing the tile floor. It stopped, and I didn't need to see either man to know they were staring at each other.

"If you're going to cook here, I expect you to clean up after yourself," Dad said.

I eased the sliding door of the candy case open an inch and peeked through. Memphis was standing at the end of the snack bar, holding a large wrench from Dad's truck. Dad was out of my line of sight.

Memphis laid the wrench on the counter, and I released a long breath. My relief was brief, though, because Memphis said, "I hear you've lost some money, Claude."

Dad came into view. "Lost, huh?" He snorted. "Stolen is more like it. And I told Sooter who took it."

"He won't believe you."

"He will when I'm done." Dad's voice shook. "You think you can come in here and steal everything, don't you? Just waltz right in and take it all, my pretty little wife and my daughter too, huh? Is that what you thought?"

Dad's rage filled the room. I had to lean my head against the candy-case doors to catch my breath.

"And did you think I was going to just stand by and watch?" Dad's voice rose mockingly. "Dumb old Claude, sitting up there in that projection booth, night after night. He'll never figure out I'm playing around with his wife in his own home, right under his nose."

Dad strained forward, his hands balled. "You've had your eye on

her since the day you came here. You've probably got one like her in every town."

Memphis swung his arm out, caught my father by the front of his shirt and, with the snap of his wrist, hurled him against the wall. Dad reeled, regained his balance and charged Memphis, jamming his head into his midsection and locking his hands around his waist. They grappled and crashed so hard against the snack bar that an enormous jar of fruit-colored gumballs on the counter above me shook and tipped. I breathlessly reached a hand toward it, but it righted itself and settled back down.

Memphis's voice was a low rasp in his chest. "You shut up about her, hear. Don't ever talk about her like that. You don't deserve her, you measly little snake."

"You're a bum and a thief, and if she doesn't know that by now, she will soon."

Memphis went crazy. He caught hold of my father and jerked him forward, slashing his hand against Dad's face. Dad staggered back and struggled to keep his footing. They crashed around the room, knocking over a wrought-iron table and a chair and hitting the plate-glass window so many times I was sure it was going to break. Finally Dad managed to back Memphis against the counter, where the wrench lay. Whether he intended to grab it first, I don't know. But within seconds Memphis spun around and snared the hunk of metal. They were no more than six feet from me.

Memphis took a step forward and lifted the wrench with both hands. His black pupils shone like tiny pellets through the slits of his eyes, reminding me of how he had looked while beating the robber. I opened my mouth to scream, but the sound lodged in my throat like a chunk of meat. I pulled back from my viewing place and slammed my shoulder as hard as I could against the candy case, hearing the sharp gasp of my own breath.

The gumball jar hit the floor with a cracking sound like a gunshot, and the air exploded with shards of glass. Tiny red, yellow, blue and green orbs clicked and bounced across the tile.

Dad stepped backward, stumbling and skidding on them, crunch-

ing them into multicolored pieces. He slumped onto the tile, with his back against the wall and his bad leg twisted under him.

Then I saw Memphis lower the wrench to his side. He was breathing hard. "She ain't going to stay with you. You know that, though, don't you?"

Dad raised his head, revealing purple-red welts along his cheekbones. "You'll never pry her out of that house."

Memphis just shrugged. Then he turned and strode out the door.

If he had stayed a few seconds more, he might have seen what I saw—the absolute despair that had settled into my father's eyes.

As soon as I had the chance, I crept away from the snack bar and, almost doubled up with nausea, fled to the sheltering arms of the willow tree. What would happen now? I was afraid for both of them, for all of us.

Somehow in the past weeks I had come to think our departure would be a happy ending, the way it was in the movies. I would discover that Memphis was an honest man, a good man. He would take Mom and me away to exciting new places. He would love us and look upon us like the father in the Norman Rockwell painting in the projection room.

And Dad? Well, I guess I had figured he would just fade away. I expected to feel bad about him and even miss him occasionally. I had never thought it would be like this.

I slowly walked back to the house, across the fields and past the concessions building. When I reached the house, Mom was about as angry as I had ever seen her. With her delicate features fixed in a frown, she held the door open for me. "Where on earth did you run off to? You get in here right now."

I drifted past her, feeling all shivery and damp with sweat. She must have seen right away how miserable I was, because her voice lost its edge. "Into bed, honey, before you fall over."

I didn't protest at all. I wobbled into the bedroom, tugged off my blouse, shorts and underpants, and slid into my worn pink-flowered pajamas. Although Mom must have been standing close by, her voice came from a distance. "I phoned over to the concessions

building, but your father said he hadn't seen you. He didn't sound right. Has something happened?"

I peeled back the bedspread and without a word crawled between the smoothly ironed sheets. Pressing my hot cheek to the pillowcase, I released a small cough. Mom rushed to my side, her thoughts only for me now.

I pitched feverishly in and out of sleep for the next several hours, glazing myself and my tangled bedsheets with a salty, burning sweat. Waking to the eye-stinging odor of Vicks on my chest, I sat up and groggily drank the 7-Up that Mom held for me, then plunged once more below the surface of sleep. I felt myself dragged into it, like an undercurrent pulling me down, like two hands tugging at me until I found myself on a long, slippery slide into a watery pit. Memphis was at the bottom of the slide, standing in a patch of clear blue light with the heavy wrench in his hand. My father's twisted and battered body lay at Memphis's feet, the blood rising from his wounds like a red cloud.

I awoke with a start.

It was dark in my room. Outside, the movie *Summertime* flickered on the screen. I heard the murmur of voices in the kitchen, Mom's and Memphis's, but I didn't have the energy to get up and eavesdrop on them. I closed my eyes.

When I awoke again, Mom was sitting in a rocking chair next to my bed, her head propped against a pillow, her slender fingers draped across my wrist. I pulled my damp sheet around me and sank back into sleep. She was still in the rocking chair when I awoke the next morning. I stirred, and she blinked her green eyes open, looking a little blank for a moment while she probably tried to remember why she was there. She stretched out of her uncomfortable position and pressed her hand to my forehead. Although my fever was gone and I felt almost back to normal, she announced firmly that I would spend the rest of the day in bed. She even insisted on walking down the hall with me to the bathroom in case I should pass out again.

The bathroom door was open, and Dad was at the sink, his face

turned away from us. He was scrubbing his fingernails with an old toothbrush Mom kept for that purpose. The water gurgled in the drain.

"You're up early," Mom said to Dad. She stood behind me in the doorway, her hands on my shoulders. "I didn't hear you come in last night. Callie Anne ran a fever, and I stayed in her room. Did you wonder where I was?"

"You weren't in our bedroom," he said dryly. "Where else would you be?" He wiped his hands on the white towel, draped it over the edge of the sink and turned around. The welts on his cheeks were ugly—purple and puffy.

Mom gasped. "What happened, Claude Junior?"

"Fell down the stairs in the concessions building. Damned leg," he said, not looking at me.

Mom didn't offer to clean the cuts or put iodine on them. She went into the kitchen, fixed me unbuttered toast, which she permitted me to eat at the table, and prepared Dad his regular breakfast. Afterward I went back to bed, and Dad limped off to the concessions building, looking tired and beaten. From my window I watched for Memphis but saw no sign of him.

When Dad returned a few hours later, Mom was rolling out sugar cookies on a wooden board. She was dressed in her yellow seersucker dress and blue print apron, and she'd brushed her wispy hair from her face so many times she had streaks of white flour mixed in with the auburn. Since I wasn't running a fever, she gave me permission to sit at the table and drink a glass of 7-Up.

Dad washed his hands at the kitchen sink, something I was never allowed to do. "Teal, I'm going into town right after dinner. Get your grocery list ready."

Mom and I stared at him, and I knew she was wondering the same thing I was. Why was he going into town a day early? Something was wrong.

I approached the subject carefully. "Did you have in mind for Memphis—"

"He isn't here," Dad said. "He left last night."

Dad wiped his hands harshly on the blue-striped dish towel, as though he couldn't quite get them dry.

I managed to squeeze out of my tight throat, "But where?"

"How should I know? He's a drifter. What do you expect? Fellas like him never stay long in one place."

It was as though he were speaking to Mom, not me, but he didn't even glance at her. My mother lowered herself onto a chair, her face as white as the flour on her hands.

"He swiped some money too." Dad's laugh was cruel, and he snorted harshly. "Wait till Sooter hears that."

"How much?" I asked softly.

"Three hundred dollars. Tidy little chunk." He threw the towel onto the counter. "Teal, have that list ready," he said, and strode out the door.

I put my head on my arms, crying in short, jerky sobs. I was vaguely aware of her chair scraping the floor. Then she was kneeling beside me, and I was sobbing onto her neck, soaking her dress and skin.

"I love him."

"Yes, I know you do."

"He said he loved us. He said he'd take us with him."

Maybe she thought I'd just guessed at Memphis's promises, or maybe she realized I knew all along.

"He'll come back for us," she said. "He loves us too."

I raised my head and looked at her with streaming eyes. "Do you think so?"

"Yes, sweetheart, I do." She took her embroidered handkerchief from her apron pocket and wiped my face. "He said you're the prettiest little thing he's ever seen."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, he did."

That sounded like him, and I wanted to believe her.

"What about the money, though? Do you think he stole the money?"

"No. He wouldn't do that." She brushed back my bangs. "He

talks about your smile. He says we have the same smile, you and I, the sweetest smile in Indiana."

She wrapped her arms around me and hugged tightly. When she finally released me, I looked at her. Tears were streaking her cheeks.

I COULDN'T believe Memphis had left without a word. While Dad was in town, I persuaded Mom to let me walk over to the concessions building to visit Memphis's room, where I might find a note, a letter that said he loved Mom and me and that he would return in a few days to take us away with him. It wasn't there. The sleeping bag was gone, and the battered wooden table was bare again. He'd left no sign he'd ever lived there. I crept out, feeling as low as I possibly could.

The next day Sheriff Jankowski and Mr. Sooter came to the drive-in. They checked around the concessions building and talked to Dad for more than an hour. The sheriff said he would put out word on Charlie Memphis, but drifters like him were hard to track down. Mr. Sooter growled something about shooting him on sight if they found him.

The hours, the days, then a week passed. No letters came, and I could tell by Mom's face he hadn't telephoned.

My parents stepped around each other as if avoiding broken glass. Occasionally their eyes caught, then darted away. The tension built, like water rising relentlessly against a levee, and a little more than a week after Memphis left, it crested.

I heard my father return home that Tuesday night. He shut the bedroom door, and a minute later the box springs squeaked. Then I heard the murmur of two voices—one demanding and insistent, the other upset. It had been at least three weeks since I'd heard any noises come from their room on a Tuesday night.

I pulled the pillow over my head. I had a bad feeling about what was going to happen.

"No!" Mom's voice cut sharply through the wall between the two bedrooms. "No. Don't."

I jerked my head from under the pillow and listened.

"If you can give it to him," he said, sounding stone-cold and mean, "you can give it to me."

Their headboard banged several times against the wall that separated our rooms. In a muffled voice she said, "No," over and over again. Then everything stopped. Several minutes later their door opened, and I heard my mother's slow shuffle toward the bathroom.

The next morning Mom's eyes were red-rimmed, and when Dad was around, she had a glint in them I'd never seen before. She didn't speak to him, not even during dinner. It was all "Callie Anne, would you like some more meat?" or "Callie Anne, would you please pass those rolls?"

Afterward Dad produced his Chesterfields and his lighter. "I need an ashtray."

She didn't move. "Get it yourself."

If she had lit a bomb, it could not have had any more force. He swung his arm around and sent his plate and glass and a bowl of biscuits all crashing to the floor. The cracked plate spun and reverberated before coming to a stop.

My mother didn't even flinch.

I sat there frozen.

Dad stood, his neck a fiery red, the entire upper half of his body shaking with rage. "Don't think I don't know what went on here."

Mother turned to me. "Callie Anne, go to your bedroom, please."

I backed my chair up and scooted out. Once I got out of their sight, I slowed down to about an inch per minute.

I heard my father explode. "He's gone, Teal. He isn't coming back."

"What makes you so sure?" Her tone was eerily calm.

"The law will get him if he does." Dad's voice lowered to a mean whisper. "Oh, I run him off, Teal. You better believe I did."

A few moments passed before she said anything.

"Don't you want to know why, Claude Junior? Why I love him?"

I nearly gasped out loud, shocked that she had used those words.

"I love him for a lot of reasons. One of them is that he cherishes me. Do you even understand what it means to cherish someone?"

Dad's hand smacked something then. It made a cracking noise like an axe splitting wood. At first I thought he'd hit the table or the wall, but the sound wasn't right. Then I realized in horror he'd struck her. I moved to where I could see them. He was standing over her in that peculiar stiltlike way he had when his leg was tired. She was still sitting, her fingers touching a white splotch the size of a silver dollar on her left cheek.

She rose up, her body rigid, her face so pale all I could see were her two enormous dark eyes. "I swore to God I'd never let anyone hit me. When I was a kid, I saw my dad hit my mother more times than I can remember, and I promised myself I'd never put up with that." She was shaking, but from anger, not fear.

He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "And what are you going to do about it? Leave?"

"Yes."

He laughed. "You can't walk two steps out that door. That's what I told him. I said, 'You'll never pry her out of that house.' "

"Callie Anne," Mom called, not taking her hard gaze off him.

It took me exactly two seconds to get there.

"Get a sweater, sweetheart."

"But it's hot outside."

"You might need it tonight."

"What about John Wayne?"

"Go get him."

When I returned carrying my pink sweater and John Wayne's cage, I found her taking coins and dollar bills from the cocoa tin.

Dad was standing by the table, looking uncertain and somehow smaller, like a tire that's suddenly lost air. "Teal, what are you doing?"

She tucked the money into a pocketbook I'd never seen before, probably because it had been five years since she had gone to town.

Dad turned to me. "Callie Anne, I didn't mean for . . ."

Without a word Mother took my free hand, and we walked out the back door. It was the third week in August, and the afternoon sun was already slanting in the sky. I glanced over my shoulder at my father. He had the most stunned look I'd ever seen on a man.

Chapter Nine

OM and I trudged along the dirt shoulder of the road toward the Eggert farm, just to the east of us. It'd been hot and dry now for so long that crops were withering in the fields and there were reports of cows toppling over in their tracks. Preachers were praying for rain, and everyone was watching the sky for clouds. The sweater was making my arm itch, and John Wayne's cage smacked against my leg. My damp bangs prickled my skin at the hairline, but I didn't have a free hand to push them back. Until it cooled off, a sweater was the last thing I was going to need.

Mom was flushed and damp with perspiration. She stopped to stare across the Eggerts' pasture, which was dotted by a dozen or so motionless brown-and-white cows. Her hand trembled in mine. "All that open space." She put her head down and walked on.

When we got to the Eggerts' house, Mom phoned Aunt Bliss. A half hour later my aunt's decrepit truck barreled along their dirt road, spraying up a cloud of dust that probably reached the drive-in. Soon I was squished between Mom and Aunt Bliss, John Wayne and his cage on my lap, the pickup's round-knobbed gearshift poking into my leg. I felt like the filling in an Oreo cookie.

Aunt Bliss and Uncle Augie lived on thirteen acres in Boagle Corner, in a white house with dormer windows and a sprawling front porch. Its paint was peeling off in large curls, showing patches of weathered wood and reminding me of a speckled Appaloosa pony. As we walked from the truck to the house, Aunt Bliss wrapped her arm around Mom's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "I can't tell you how good it is to have you out and around again. I was afraid I'd never see the day."

In a voice that reminded me of my schoolteacher's, Mom said, "Well, we've just come for a visit."

Aunt Bliss acted as though she hadn't heard her. "You got every right to leave Claude." She held the screen door open for us. "Many's the time I've come home and told Augie about the way that lowlife—"

Mom swung around. "Now look, Bliss, I don't need you carrying on about my husband. I've got enough anger inside of me for two of us."

"Well, sure you do," Aunt Bliss said soothingly. "And rightly so. He's a mean, selfish son of a—"

"Stop it!" Mom smacked the palm of her hand against the screen door. It broke free from my aunt's hold and slammed shut.

We both froze. Aunt Bliss looked at her as though she didn't recognize her.

Mom grabbed my hand and started down the steps, walking in the direction of the road and half dragging me behind her. Aunt Bliss rushed past us, faster than I would have expected her sizable body to travel, and blocked our path. "Now don't go off, Teal. I'll shut my mouth."

Mom sighed. "I'm not asking you to do that, certainly not in your own home, but I simply can't deal with your carrying on about him. Maybe it's best we find somewhere else to stay."

Aunt Bliss grabbed her wrist. "No, please. I won't say anything more. Really, you're welcome here." In a tone of almost mournful resignation she added, "I just want what's best for you, Teal."

Mom smiled and gave her a hug. Hand in hand we all three walked back to the house. A breeze had come up, ruffling the leaves in the nearby oaks, and some dark clouds were swelling on the horizon.

That night Mom and I slept in a stuffy attic bedroom, with its sloped walls and floor space large enough to hold only a double bed and an old pine dresser. Mom opened the window, and I could feel the cool air coming through it. She was wearing a muslin nightgown that Aunt Bliss had loaned her. It hung off her shoulders and trailed along the floor. I wore one of Uncle Augie's white T-shirts.

Mom carefully folded the chenille spread and laid it on the dresser. We crawled into bed, leaving the sheet and blanket draped over the footboard. Curled up, our heads on the pillows and both exhausted, we smiled at each other. She took my hands in hers. "You okay?"

"Uh-huh." But I wasn't. I wondered where we would live now. Aunt Bliss's was all right, but her pillowcases didn't smell like ours, and her house didn't feel like home.

I snuggled in. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Do you still love Memphis?"

"Yes." She pushed my hair away from my forehead. "I love your father too."

"You do?" I couldn't hide my surprise. "But how can you love both of them?"

"I just do, the same way I love you."

As I thought about this, thunder rumbled in the distance and a gust of wind blew the curtain inward, so that it billowed like the puffed-out sail on a ship. Mom got up, pulled down the heavy sash, then crawled back into bed.

"Do you think Memphis will come back?"

"Yes."

"But how can you believe that, when we haven't even heard from him?"

"Because he believed in me when I needed him to."

The rain came down then in wild, violent sheets. It hammered the shingle roof and slashed against our window. The sky cracked open with a blue-white lightning and throbbed with booms and crashes. The entire house seemed to shake. Mom pulled the sheet and blanket over us, and I burrowed my head under the feather pillow.

After several minutes the storm eased to a steady downpour. I tried to think about what Mom had said about Memphis and Dad, but I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer.

WHEN Aunt Bliss drove us back to the drive-in for our clothes the next day, Mom asked us to wait in the truck. At the front door

she paused for a moment to smooth the skirt on her green print housedress, patted her hair into place and straightened her back. The screen door closed softly behind her.

We waited inside that muggy, hot truck for what seemed like a long time. The rain hadn't cooled things off much. The back of my blouse kept sticking to the seat upholstery.

Finally Mom came out, lugging a brown leather suitcase and a Miller's Department Store shopping bag. My father, his limp more noticeable than ever, trailed behind her. "Teal, I want to talk to you."

She turned to him. "It's too soon to talk, Claude Junior. You need to consider how you've hurt me."

"I was only doing what was good for you and for our marriage. Can't we just go back to the way it used to be?"

Her eyes burned dark. "I will never go back to that. All these years you've criticized and belittled me. That's not the way love is supposed to be."

"But I do love you, Teal. Can't you see that?" His voice cracked. "That's why I run him off. He couldn't . . . couldn't ever love you like I do."

Mother shook her head slowly. "I don't know, Claude Junior. Maybe you'll never understand." She hitched up the leather suitcase and started walking toward us.

Dad followed, a few paces behind her. "When you were stuck in the house, Teal, I didn't leave you. Another man might have picked up and moved out, but I didn't. I stayed by you."

She nodded. "Yes, you did, and I appreciate that."

He reached out his hand, but she kept on walking. His face reminded me of John Wayne's—my turtle, I mean, not the movie star. He looked old and wrinkled and sad, and I had to turn away so I wouldn't cry. I knew then what Mom meant about loving him and Memphis both. But Memphis had the whole world, and Dad's world was just my mother.

A FEW days later Mom walked out on the front porch and across the grassy yard just as Dad, grim and determined, was climbing

down from his blue pickup. His eyes had pouches under them, but he stood straight as a fence post beside the open truck door. He and Mom talked in low voices. She shook her head.

His face twisted into a grimace, and he gestured toward the front seat of the pickup. "Damn it, Teal, get in there. You and Callie Anne are coming home where you belong."

Mom spun around and walked quickly toward the house, not once looking back.

I thought for a moment he might come after her. Instead, he turned and slammed his fist down hard on the truck hood. When Mom reached the top porch step, he climbed in and drove away.

They repeated that scene, or something like it, for the next week and a half. He came regularly every other day, as if he kept track on a calendar. With each visit his white theater manager's shirt became more rumpled and dirty, until I began to wonder if he was ever going to change it at all. It struck me that he might not be taking care of the drive-in either. If Mr. Sooter found out, he could lose his job. That gave me a whole new set of worries.

One morning when Dad arrived, I was sitting on the front-porch swing with Mom, shucking the last of the summer corn into a galvanized pail. He stumbled up the front steps, grabbed the porch column and fixed his bleary gaze on Mom. "You gotta come back, Teal." His words were slurred, and he swallowed a fuzzy belch.

I stared at him. His skin had turned a yellowish gray and seemed to sag on his skull. His shirt gaped where it hadn't been buttoned up right, and the front of it was stained. This couldn't be my father. My chin started to quiver uncontrollably. I looked at Mom and saw her face contort as though she might cry too.

She gathered the ears of corn from her lap and handed them to me. "Take them into the kitchen, will you, honey?"

I stayed inside, watching and listening through a screened window.

Dad wound his arms around the porch column. "You're killing me, Teal."

Mom studied him for a moment. "No, Claude Junior, you're doing this to yourself." She rose from the swing and shook the corn

silk from her apron. "I'm not going to listen to you while you're in this condition. You should be ashamed to have your daughter see you like this. Did you really think I'd go home with you while you were drunk?"

He didn't answer.

She sighed. "I suppose the house is a mess too."

He wouldn't meet her eyes.

"I thought so." She took a step backward. "Go home. Clean yourself up and that house too. And don't even plan on coming back here until you're sober."

She eased through the door before I had a chance to back away from the window. Just inside the living room, there was a nubby old armchair, and she leaned against it, steadying herself. She closed her eyes, and for a moment she looked like a doll that has lost all its stuffing. Blinking her eyes open, she caught sight of me and straightened.

I turned back to the window. Dad had crumpled onto the top porch step, his arms still reaching upward for the post. He began to cry, tearing the sobs deep from his chest. Tears ran down the lines of his face into the corners of his mouth.

I wanted to run as fast as I could, to race across the pasture behind Aunt Bliss's house until I had no breath left in my lungs. But instead, I took my mother's damp, trembling hand, and we walked slowly and steadily toward the kitchen.

THE next time he came, he was wearing a new white shirt that still had the creases from its cardboard wrapping. His eyes were watery and bloodshot, but at least he could walk across the yard without stumbling. He and Mom sat on the porch swing and talked in low voices.

"How did it come to this?" she asked. "It started out with such hope." She smiled sadly. "When did that all change?"

He looked at her, not speaking.

"Well," she said, "I used to think if I could just be a better wife, you wouldn't have all that anger. But no matter how hard I tried, I

couldn't do anything to make it right. I don't believe now it had much to do with me at all. It's got more to do with yourself and all that wanting you've buried so deep inside that it's festering like a sore. Don't ask me how it got in there. I couldn't tell you that, and I don't suppose you could either. Anyway, I'm not afraid of your anger anymore, so I guess I'll come back to you." She got up from the swing and walked to the screen door. "But I'll never let you treat me the way you used to. And there'll be no second chances. Do you understand that, Claude Junior?"

He nodded slowly.

She sighed. "Well, we'll have to see if we can make some new kind of life for ourselves. Come back tomorrow if you want to." She walked into the house, quietly shutting the screen door behind her.

All the rest of that day I felt more confused than ever. I wanted to go home, and I didn't want to go home. I felt sorry for Dad, and I didn't feel sorry for him. I wanted Memphis to take us away, but I wondered what would happen to Dad if we left.

WHEN Dad came back the following morning, he was carrying a florist's bouquet of yellow roses. He waited on the front porch and talked politely to Aunt Bliss while Mom and I packed the brown leather suitcase. We rode home together in our truck.

I felt as though I'd been away for years. No one had picked up the litter at the drive-in while I was gone. There were popcorn bags and candy wrappers scattered across the parking field, and one of the speaker poles had toppled over. Even our house seemed dreary and smaller. Mom surveyed it without comment.

Dad wore a thin, apologetic smile. "It's not as clean as when you're here."

"It'll do." She pulled out a vase for flowers. "I won't have time to fix a regular dinner, so we'll just have to have sandwiches."

"That's okay. I don't mind," he said.

Mom put the roses in the center of the table. She couldn't find any bread for sandwiches, so she made us eggs, sausages and biscuits with butter and honey. Afterward Dad leaned back in his chair

and sighed contentedly. "That was great. Nothing I fixed ever tasted like yours." He reached into his shirt pocket for his Chesterfields.

I held my breath.

I could see the realization of the moment flicker through his head. Springing from the chair, he limped across the room and grabbed the ashtray from the windowsill. He sat down and lit his cigarette. Mom hadn't moved at all.

Nothing was said, but across the table their eyes met.

ON MONDAY school started, and not long after that, the drive-in closed for the winter.

We'd been home a month when I heard Mom tell Aunt Bliss that Dad had changed. I guess she was right. He didn't say mean things to her much anymore, and whenever he forgot and started to boss her around, she could stop him with just a firmness in her expression. He even tried to be nice. Once or twice he asked me how John Wayne was, and the week after school started, he bought me a brown cow at Bonnie Doon's soda fountain, a hangout for the high school kids. I kept looking around to see if Virgil might come in, but he didn't.

Without Memphis, Mom wasn't exactly contented, but she wasn't scared the way she had been before either. Every once in a while I saw a sadness cross her face, and I'd know she was thinking of him.

And me? I wasn't happy about anything. I missed Memphis, but at the same time I hated him for leaving us. I began to believe he must have swiped the three hundred dollars and that when it was staring him in the face, he forgot all about Mom and me. Maybe he decided he just didn't want the responsibility of us after all.

Mom must have guessed what I was thinking because once she whispered, "He'll come back. You wait and see."

"He won't," I said.

"Yes, he will."

I carefully weighed what I was going to say next. It had been bothering me for some time. "It's not just the stolen money. He killed a man."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, first of all, he told Virgil he'd been in some kind of fight. And then I read a newspaper story about two murders in Seattle. I think one of the men who died was Memphis's brother and the other was the man who killed him." Deciding not to mention where I'd found the clipping, I hurried right along. "I think the police were looking for Memphis for murdering the second man. I'll bet that's why he didn't want to be in any newspaper photos after the box office was robbed. He was afraid someone would recognize him."

She laid her hand on her chest and released a long sigh of relief, as if to say she knew I was wrong and she could set me straight. "He didn't kill anybody, honey. He told me all about it."

I blinked several times. "He did?"

"That's right, and it wasn't the way you think it was. It's true his brother was killed in a fight. He'd just gotten out of the navy, and they were in a bar celebrating, when a fellow picked an argument. He stabbed Charlie Memphis's brother. By the time Charlie Memphis realized what had happened, it was too late. The murderer ran off, and the police never caught him."

"Memphis never killed anyone?"

"No, and he's never forgiven himself for his brother's death."

I thought of how weary and sad Memphis had looked after the robbery, how he'd refused to talk to the sheriff. Something still wasn't quite right.

"Mom?"

"What, sweetheart?"

"Wasn't the brother's name Chester?"

"That's right."

"What was his last name?"

"Why, it was Memphis. Chester Memphis. What else would it be?"

"Did Charlie Memphis ever mention someone named Mathias—or John Michael Huston?"

"I don't believe so."

"And the fight? Do you know where it happened? What city, I mean?"

She shook her head. "You'll have to ask Charlie Memphis that when he comes back."

DAD ground his cigarette out with his shoe. "You been taking good care of that turtle, Callie Anne. Still feeding him worms?"

"Uh-huh."

We were standing outside the closed concessions building in the fading October light, watching John Wayne scoot across the gravel like a runaway stagecoach. I went after him and brought him back. "He's got that dent in his shell and he leans a bit to the side, but he's mostly healed up. I'm going to let him go soon. I've read up on turtles, and I think he should be starting to hibernate about now."

"Like a bear, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

Dad picked up a smooth, round rock and bounced it in the palm of his hand. "Callie Anne?"

"Yeah?"

"How'd you like to move into Jessup?"

I swung around. "Jessup?"

Dad nodded with a self-satisfied air, as though he were passing out Christmas presents. "We'll be leaving in three weeks."

I glanced around, at the house and the blank white screen. All I could think about was there'd be no more movies each summer outside my window.

I looked at him. "What will we do without the movies?"

"I'm going to buy us a television set once we get settled."

"Oh," I said dully. I felt my insides shift, as if he were trying to take some part of me away from myself.

"I've got a new job lined up." His fist tightened on the rock he'd been tossing from hand to hand. "At that Dodge plant they just built in town."

I couldn't believe it. "But you think Dodges are pieces of junk. You said so yourself."

"They make brakes at this plant. They don't assemble the automobiles there." He chucked the stone at a speaker pole about

fifteen feet away. It hit with a ping and bounced off. "Besides, they pay good wages. It doesn't mean I have to drive one."

"Does Mom know we're moving?"

He nodded. "She's all in favor of it."

I wondered.

He stuck his thumbs in his pockets. "You'll be able to have all the new clothes you want this winter. Why, in a year or two we can save enough money to buy a house. Then later, if we want to, we can move somewhere else, to some other state maybe."

I didn't think I'd ever seen my dad this excited about anything. But then I looked at the movie screen, and it seemed too much to give up. I shrugged and mumbled, "I don't know."

"You wait and see," he said. "Everything's going to be better."

He picked up John Wayne's cage and peered into it. "You can keep him if you want."

I shook my head. "I need to set him free before he forgets how to find his own food. I figure if he hibernates this winter, he won't remember a thing about me when he wakes up in the spring." I turned away so he wouldn't see my tears.

ACCORDING to the book *Reptiles and Amphibians of North America,* a turtle needs to spend the winter in a hole in the ground below the frost line. Dad said I'd have to dig at least eighteen inches or two feet to be safe. I hiked to the creek and studied the thick underbrush. Could it have been only last spring I was sloshing around in the mud here, catching frogs? It seemed a lot longer. I didn't have the slightest interest in such child's play anymore.

I found a good spot between some tree roots that bulged out over the water and, using a small shovel Dad had loaned me, began digging. Every afternoon that week I worked on the pit after school for a half hour or so. When the hole looked deep enough, I measured it with a yardstick to make sure. Then, as the book suggested, I lined it with straw, grass and leaves. As an afterthought I put in a dead beetle and a bottle cap filled with water just in case John Wayne woke up and wanted a snack.

On Saturday I rose at six o'clock with a tightness around my heart. The house was silent in the early gray light. I pulled on a pair of navy-blue slacks, slipped on an old blouse and a corduroy jacket, and left by the back door, closing it softly behind me.

All the past week I'd kept John Wayne in the garden shed to prepare him for the cold weather. That was Dad's idea. I found John Wayne in a corner of his cage, tucked tight inside his shell.

When I held him up, he didn't stick out his head to see who was disturbing him so early, but I could see his beady red eyes peering at me. Wondering if he could somehow sense what was going to happen, I ran my finger over the leathery skin of his foot. It didn't seem that anyone could care about a turtle, but I did.

I hiked toward the creek. The eastern horizon was aglow with the rising sun and smelled of last night's rain, but over my shoulder, dull gray snow clouds were moving in. Under the tree limb I set John Wayne on a damp rock. He was so sluggish now, he didn't even try to scramble off. It had crossed my mind to paint my initials on his shell with pink fingernail polish, but somehow it didn't seem right. Memphis could have explained why. Anyway, I was sure I'd know John Wayne if I ever saw him again.

I set him in the pit and gazed at him for one last time. With a final sigh that seemed to catch in my throat, I piled straw and leaves on top of him, then filled the hole with dirt. I gave the loose earth a quick pat, then stood and walked away. I didn't look back.

For a while I had believed that if I released John Wayne, my good deed would bring Memphis back. Now I knew no matter what I did, he wouldn't return. But my anger over his leaving didn't well up in me as it had before. I remembered him telling me he wasn't any hero, and in some ways he might not have been, but I knew in other ways he was. When I thought about all the things that had happened during the summer, I began to feel more than a year older. There are some things we gain at a terrible cost, and Memphis was one of them. I wept and started to run.

I didn't know where I was going, but I couldn't seem to stop. It was spitting snow. The falling moisture, mixed with my salty tears,

chafed my face. I ran miles and miles before I ended up where I must have been headed all the time.

Off the road, down a long graveled driveway, a plain two-story white house rose proud and tidy on a lot that was marked on the front and sides by carefully arranged whitewashed rocks. Halfway down the driveway I stopped, put my hands on my knees and gulped lungfuls of air while the blood pounded in my head.

A tall, gangly figure carrying two pails came around the corner of the barn. Something released in my chest, as if a spring had popped free. If it hadn't been Virgil, I'm not sure what I would have done. I would never have had the courage to walk up to his front door. When he saw me, he set the buckets down and headed toward me, his strides long and easy.

Snowflakes big as quarters were falling now. I felt one land on the end of my nose, and I brushed it away. "So how have you been?"

"Okay." He studied my face, which must have been red and tear-stained. "How about you?" he asked.

"All right." Feeling the chill now, I began to shiver. "I heard you were going steady with April."

"Well, I'm not."

"You haven't stopped by the theater lately."

"My dad's buried my nose in the work here."

My teeth started to chatter. "G-guess I'd better be going." I turned and took a few steps.

"Callie Anne?"

I looked back. He had unzipped his green wool jacket and was holding it open. I dove into it like I was sliding into home. He held me so close I could hear his heart beating.

"I let John Wayne go."

"It was the right thing."

I swallowed hard. "Then why did it hurt so much?"

He pulled me in tighter.

There was a great deal I wanted to tell him. About my mother and about Billy. About Memphis and my sense of betrayal. But I couldn't think how to put it all into words.

So I said instead, "We're moving to Jessup."

"I'll come visit you there."

I burrowed against his warm chest. "I thought you liked April," I said in a muffled voice.

"Nope."

"She's beautiful."

He didn't hesitate. "Not like you."

I pulled back and stared at him. I knew I was smart, but never for one minute had I ever thought I was beautiful. The boys at school hardly noticed me. Through fogged-up glasses I gazed at the intelligent blue eyes that, like Memphis's, saw things others couldn't. And I wondered how I ever could have thought of him merely as Memphis's sidekick.

Chapter Ten

TRAN my fingers over the engraved letters on the lighter: C.M. I had always thought it stood for Charlie Memphis, but it could have been Charles Mathias.

And the other things in the grave? The belt buckle, the metal box, the wrench, even the partially decomposed leather cowboy boots told me he was Charlie Memphis. In a few days the coroner would probably rule that he'd died from a blow to the skull.

But I didn't need his verdict. I was already constructing the scenes in my head. They played there as clearly as if they had flashed across some large white screen: Dad watching the cars exit the drive-in that night after he and Memphis had fought, lingering until nothing and no one but the crickets and the night animals were stirring. He must have wakened Memphis with some story. A faucet wouldn't shut off, or a pipe had burst in some dark recess of the building.

I can imagine Dad luring Memphis to that spot, waiting for him to bend over to assess the damage, then smashing him across the back of his head with the wrench. He had dragged him to a hole and buried him. There were holes dug all over the drive-in that summer. Any freshly turned dirt wouldn't have attracted attention. As for the box, I knew exactly what the sheriff would find in it. Three hundred and twenty dollars—the original missing twenty and the three hundred Dad later accused Memphis of stealing. My father could never have spent that money. That was his strange brand of honesty.

He must have been horrified about what he'd done. I know Dad wasn't evil. I had always wondered how Mom's threats alone could have changed him so dramatically. Now, another reason for his transformation shone clear as a window to his heart and his mind. Guilt. He took Memphis's life, and he owed him something in return, even if it was no more than to treat my mother the way she deserved.

And Mother? What about her? Did my father rob her of the happiness she might have had with Memphis, that radiant, almost transcendent love he brought her those sweet, steamy nights?

I don't know. Who can say how the affair would have ended? Charlie Memphis—or whatever his name was—was a drifter. He'd had a rough life, one that I still believe included murder. I suspect we saw only the best of him. What transpired between my mother and Memphis was an encapsulated fantasy that flickered to life when the sun went down. In some ways it was an incredibly beautiful love story that could have played out only on a movie screen. It didn't take place in a little white house at an ordinary drive-in theater in the middle of rural Indiana. It occurred in an exotic café in Casablanca or the South Pacific island of Bali Hai.

But romantic notions or not, Memphis gave Mother back her self, and I'll always thank him for that.

Strangely enough, or perhaps not so strangely if you consider who she is, Mother has never stopped believing in Memphis. More than once she's whispered to me, "He'll come back. Just wait and see. One of these days he'll come walking through that door. . . ."

And I smile and hug her.

I can't help but think about the ironies of life. In 1973 Mother entered a jingle contest conducted by an Indianapolis radio station and won a trip to Paris. Dad grumbled and said he had too much work to do to traipse all over some foreign country, so she took me. That woman who'd trapped herself in her house for five long years had more fun than most women ever have. And I did too.

I'm glad she had that time, that we had it together, because the following year Dad fell ill with cancer. He'd turned withdrawn and moody with age, and if I were to speak in parables, I'd say the guilt ate away at him. It took him eight months to die, my mother nursing him with devotion.

Mother still lives in the two-bedroom house she and Dad bought twenty-eight years ago in Jessup. My home's about three miles away.

I didn't marry Virgil. I wasn't allowed to date until I turned sixteen, and by that time Virgil had gone off to Purdue University to study aeronautical engineering. Armed with his master's degree, he moved to Los Angeles to build airplanes. After graduation from Indiana University with a degree in business, I married a high school classmate named Alan Dicksen. I didn't see Virgil again until he was home for his twentieth high school reunion. I ran into him in Jessup—literally ran smack into him and got lipstick all over his blue tie. We talked for several minutes and met twice for coffee after that. He was coming off a divorce, and my relationship with my husband wasn't so great at the time.

We flirted with possibilities until one of us—and I can't remember who—said, "Before, when we were kids, it was too soon. Now it's too late."

I won't be going back to the drive-in again, and I won't tell the younger sheriff Jankowski that the man in the grave is Memphis and the man who killed him was my father. There's no point in it now. In a few weeks the drive-in will be leveled. Nothing from the years I spent there will be left, none of the funny little humps for cars to drive up to, no massive screen that glowed with fantasies on a warm night, no tiny frame house that held love and hate and all the complexities and mysteries of life for a young girl. It'll all be

gone, along with Memphis and the mystery of what happened to him.

As I returned the cigarette lighter to its plastic bag, bits of dirt and grit sloughed off and fell to the bottom of the pouch. I wouldn't tell the sheriff who was in that grave, but I would tell my mother. Finally she would know what had happened to Memphis, know he never meant to leave us.

I parked my old station wagon by the curb, tucked the plastic-shrouded lighter into my purse and stepped out. I found her in the backyard, weeding her garden. She stood, brushing the dirt from her housedress, a faded print I remembered from my childhood. I hadn't been able to persuade her to abandon dresses for jeans or slacks. She made me think of a little white-haired Englishwoman puttering among her plants. She gave off a fresh light fragrance, perhaps from touching the lavender that populated her garden.

She looked around. "Hello, sweetheart. Is my favorite granddaughter with you?"

"She's still at work. Alan's going to pick her up on his way home."

She pushed back a tendril of runaway hair. "Oh, good, you can stay a minute, then. It seems like we hardly ever have a chance to talk anymore."

Her face was so bright, so full of imperturbable good cheer that I wondered if I could tell her about Memphis.

"I dropped by Aunt Bliss's house earlier today," I said.

"Oh?"

"Irma Schmidt called while I was there."

"She called here too." Her gaze drifted back toward the garden.

I sucked in a breath. "She told you, then, about the bones at the drive-in."

Mother nodded. "I said I didn't know whose they could possibly be." She looked at me, her eyes as guileless as when I was a child.

This was going to be much more difficult than I had expected. I took her hands and rubbed my thumbs over her finely wrinkled skin. "Mother, I know whose bones they are."

I felt a tremor run through her. "They're Billy's, aren't they?" she whispered. "I didn't want to think it."

I gripped tighter. "They belong to Memphis, Mother. I'm sure."

She hunched her small shoulders and shook her head.

I clasped her face between my hands. "It's okay now. Don't you see? He didn't leave us behind like we thought he did."

She stood unmoving, tears slipping from beneath her long, lowered lashes, which were still nut-brown. "Of course he didn't," she murmured. "Because it's not Charlie Memphis buried there. You're mistaken. It's Billy, poor sad Billy, all alone in that grave."

"It can't be. Billy hopped a train. I saw him. Besides, there were things with the bones that could only belong to—" I rummaged inside my shoulder bag and pulled out the lighter. "Remember this?" I held it in my outstretched hand. "See, it has his initials on it."

She glanced at it and drew away, her body stiffening. When she looked at me again, I found the strong light in her eyes jarring. "I've never seen it before in my life," she said, her chin tilted up.

In the long silence that followed, a wind chime jingled its endless tune. I stared at her and realized I was doing a terrible thing. She had not been the one with troubling doubts.

I stuffed the lighter back into my purse and murmured, "For a moment I thought it belonged to Memphis, but I was wrong." I gestured toward the small, round table under the plum tree and the painted metal lawn chairs. "Shall I make us a pot of coffee and set out some cookies?"

She had already turned away. "That would be nice, sweetheart. The percolator's on the drainboard." She reached for a nearby tomato plant and snapped off a withered vine, releasing what I thought was the most wonderful heady fragrance in the garden.

About the Authors

GINNY DEMILLE

NELSON DEMILLE

Like his literary hero Ernest Hemingway, Nelson DeMille has always longed for adventure. Drafted into the infantry in 1966 and sent to Vietnam, he began his writing career with an unpublished diary of his wartime experiences. Following his military service, he channeled his soldier-of-fortune dreams into writing police novels. With his thriller *By the Rivers of Babylon* in 1978, he broke into the big time. DeMille is a lifelong resident of Long Island, New York.

BELVA PLAIN

JAN PRESS

With *Homecoming,* Belva Plain marks a string of fourteen best sellers that began two decades ago with *Evergreen.* Equally at home writing contemporary or historical stories, this remarkable woman is a mother of three (her daughter Nancy, also an author, writes children's books), a grandmother, a dog lover (there's almost always a dog or two in her novels), an avid traveler, and a rose gardener. Nonetheless, she still finds time to devote to her writing and is now penning what will no doubt be her fifteenth best seller.

DICK FRANCIS

ADRIAN HOUGHTON/DORLING KINDERSLEY

The political assassination mystery in *10 Lb. Penalty* occurred to Dick Francis at a cricket match in England, where he met then Prime Minister John Major, a longtime fan. When Francis offered to bring a copy of his latest novel to number Ten Downing Street, Major quickly agreed. "But don't give it to these fellows," the P.M. said, indicating his bomb-wary bodyguards. "They'll put it in a bucket of water." *10 Lb. Penalty* is Francis's eighteenth appearance in Reader's Digest books.

JANE SOUTHELAND

MARJORIE REYNOLDS

First-time novelist Marjorie Reynolds grew up in a small town in Indiana and, like the young heroine of *The Starlite Drive-in,* spent her share of hours at the local drive-in. After college she parlayed her love of movies into an advertising job with Cineplex Odeon. Today she lives near Seattle with her husband Michael Shoemaker, her son Matt, and a Maltese "wonder dog." Their neighborhood, with its conifers and ferns, "doesn't look anything like Indiana," Reynolds says.

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GINNY DEMILLE

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